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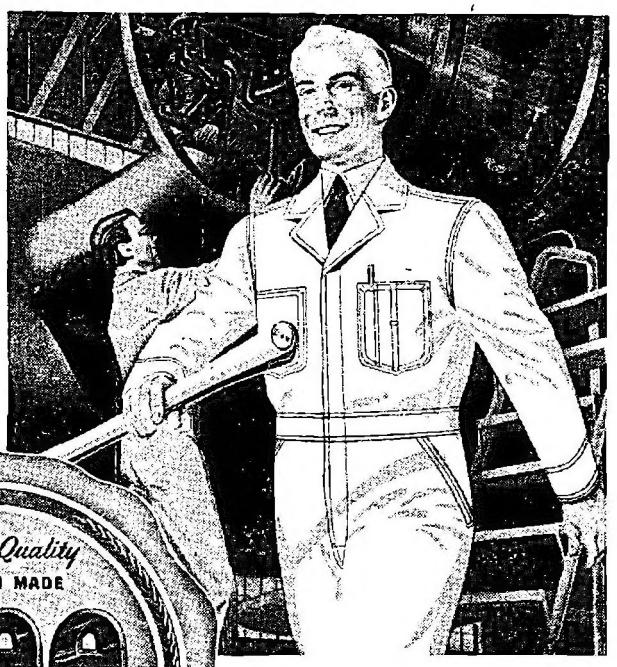

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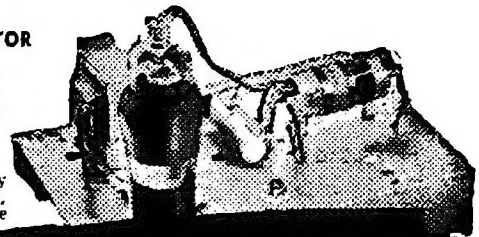

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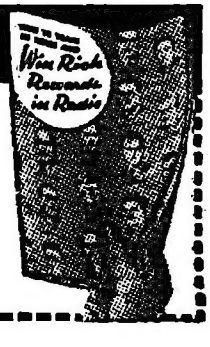

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VOL. VI MARCH, 1945 No. 4

Book-Length Novel

The Machine Stops **Wayland Smith** 8

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Short Story

Before I Wake. **Henry Kuttner** 106

Brighter grew the vision that Pete saw of a land of beauty across the Seven Seas, and dimmer, more shadowy, grew the ugly world he lived in. And all the while they called to him to come back, come back before it was too late.

The Readers' Viewpoint 6

In the Next Issue 103

The New Lawrence Portfolio 105

Cover and illustrations by Lawrence.

All the stories in this publication are either new or have never appeared in a magazine.

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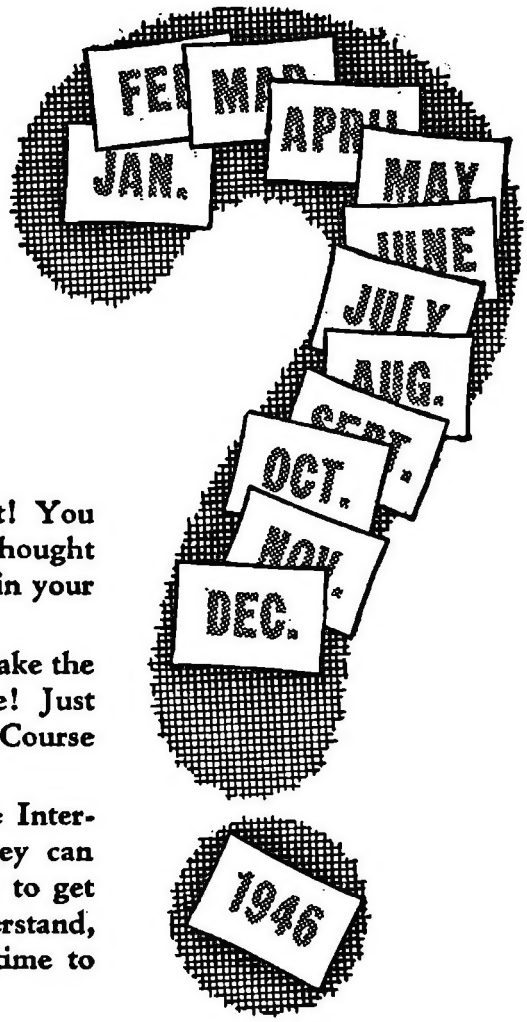
what will YOU be doing one year from TODAY



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The Readers' Viewpoint

Address comments to the Letter Editor, Famous Fantastic Mysteries, All-Fiction Field, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York

ADMIRER OF DEUCALION

Dear Editor:

It would seem to me that a good way for me to celebrate my birthday in the Navy would be to comment on the latest F.F.M.

First may I be allowed to object to those who claim that Dunsany's stories never get anywhere? I believe that the contrary is true. I especially believe that "The Highwayman" cleverly and quickly got quite a long way—quite a long way!

Dunsany's tales are amusing, literary, different and rather short, and promote good Clyne art. Your lead novels are usually inclined to be colorful, dynamic and sufficiently full of action and plot to satisfy the "blood-and-thunder-fan." Therefore I do not see why anyone should begrudge Dunsany a few cleverly filled pages. Personally I go for both types.

"The Lost Continent" was a welcome change from your "cave men" and to me much more colorful and romantic. One followed Deucalion through the rainbow of action and suspense, knowing the end was obviously preordained, yet vainly hoping that he would save Atlantis from Phorenice. I myself ended the story with a feeling of satisfaction and felt as if I'd found a new friend—Deucalion—a courageous soldier and a soul beyond reproach, a man who quite well played his rôle against a contrary tide and a man of a caliber that today's world could use.

As for your art work: Well, being a sailor I liked the December cover.

Your interior art is all for the good, with Clyne equaling Lawrence and bidding fair to surpass him some bright issue.

Editor, my Navy letters to F.F.M. have come from boot camp, a hospital bed, outgoing units and Corps School. Now they are from a hospital again but I'm glad to say I'm working there and not a patient. My work is most interesting and I believe is the best part of our Navy but still I look forward to a tomorrow when—from my den—I'll write again, not only letters, but stories and poems and even have time to illustrate my own literary efforts.

In the meantime:—a 25c F.F.M., a $25 bond—both are bargains!

Yours,
ROSCO E. WRIGHT HA2/c

A GREAT ATLANTIS TALE

The December issue was very good!! Excellent, in fact. And I have to admit that our mag is climbing up again to its old heights of glory! "The Ark of Fire," the Chesterton and Tooker books, and now "The Lost Continent" are bringing F.F.M. back! This story of Atlantis is truly a "breath taking novel" as the blurb says. It is a first-rate fantasy, beautifully, clearly and credibly written. It ranks with "Claimed" and "Sunken World" in my opinion, as really great Atlantis tales. There is real suspense, drama, imagination! Phorenice is indeed a powerful figure, and is comparable to Lur of Merritt's "Dwellers in the Mirage" and Black Margot of Weinbaum's "Black Flame." Hyne is not the master of description that Merritt is, to describe adequately the beauty of the woman, but he catches her spirit completely! It is hard to imagine how one woman could create so much turmoil, trouble and tragedy (hmm—alliteration) but she is completely believable. Nais may be compared to Evalie, but again Merritt's creation is the better. Nevertheless Nais is believable. And Deucalion is no lusty emotional fellow like Leif Langdon but he is perfect in his own strong stoical self. Zaemon is very well done, a wild fanatical priest, the closest to him being, I suppose, Lur's high priest though he was for himself. Each shows that fanaticism, though.

So, if you haven't gathered this conclusion yet, I enjoyed the story very much! If the author wrote any other fantasies, please try to get them also. By the way, please put the date of publication along with the copyright line. I always like to see when a story came out.

I like Dunsany's short story very much also. He wrote it sympathetically and gently; one could almost hear the wind moaning through the highwayman's bones, and the music as his soul found freedom—and I also had to smile at the conclusion, as the sinners committed a sin that was beautiful and kind. Let's have more of Dunsany, says this "Dunsany enthusiast." Ronald Clyne's drawing was very well done; you have made a real find in this artist—keep him. Lawrence was great again on those interiors!! The bordered drawings had true scope and action. How about a portfolio of these bordered drawings for some lucky civilians? Lawrence may not have the flair for fantasy that Finlay has, but he is a real artist. The best to have appeared yet in F.F.M. As for the cover, Phorenice was important, I admit, but not to have her face take up the whole cover! Lots of luck. V . . .—

PVT. BEN INDICK

FROM A WELL-KNOWN AUTHOR

Mr. Tooker is altogether too modest about the associations of extinct animals and birds with his primitive men in "The Day of the Brown Horde".

(Continued on page 115)

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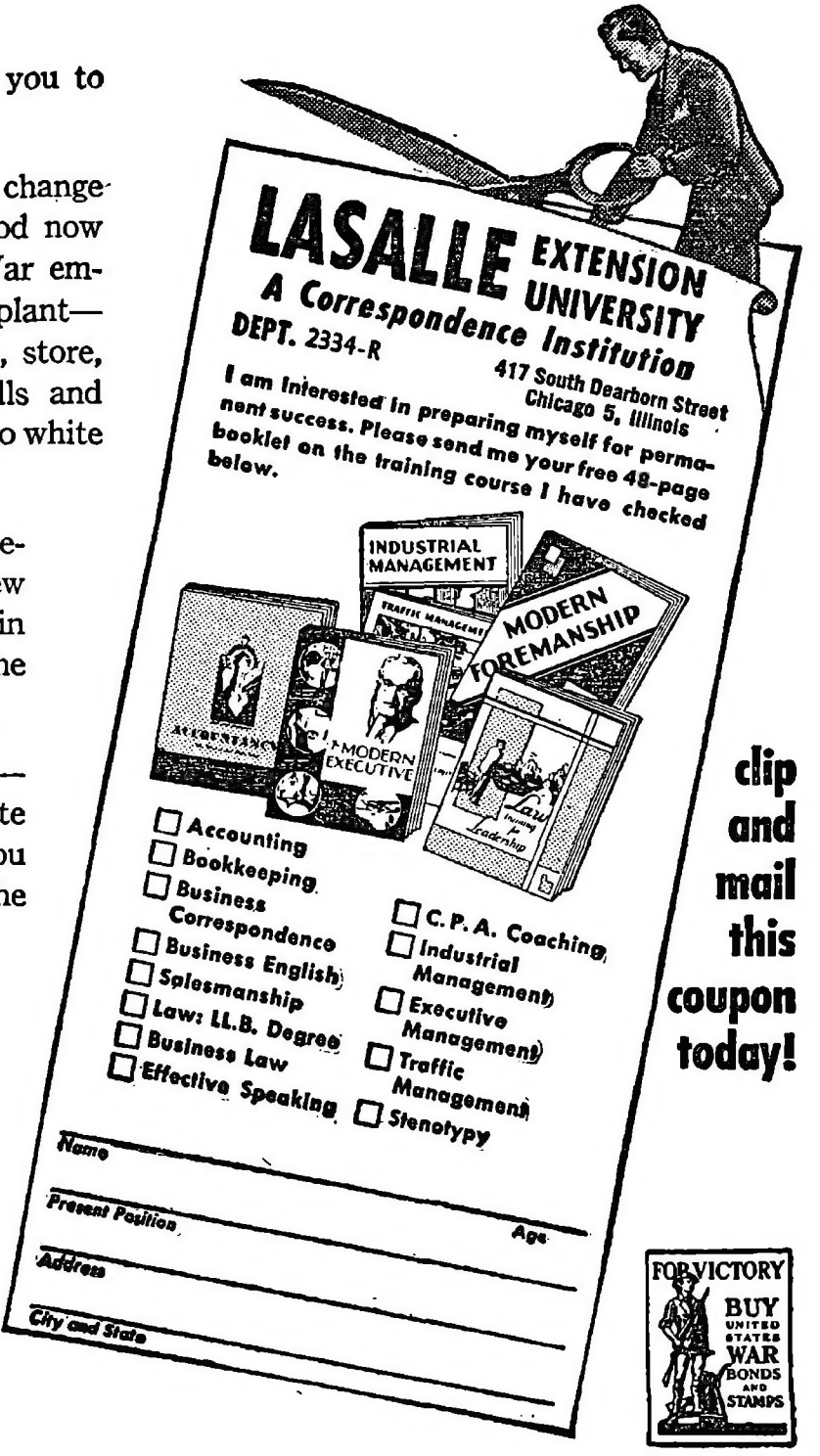

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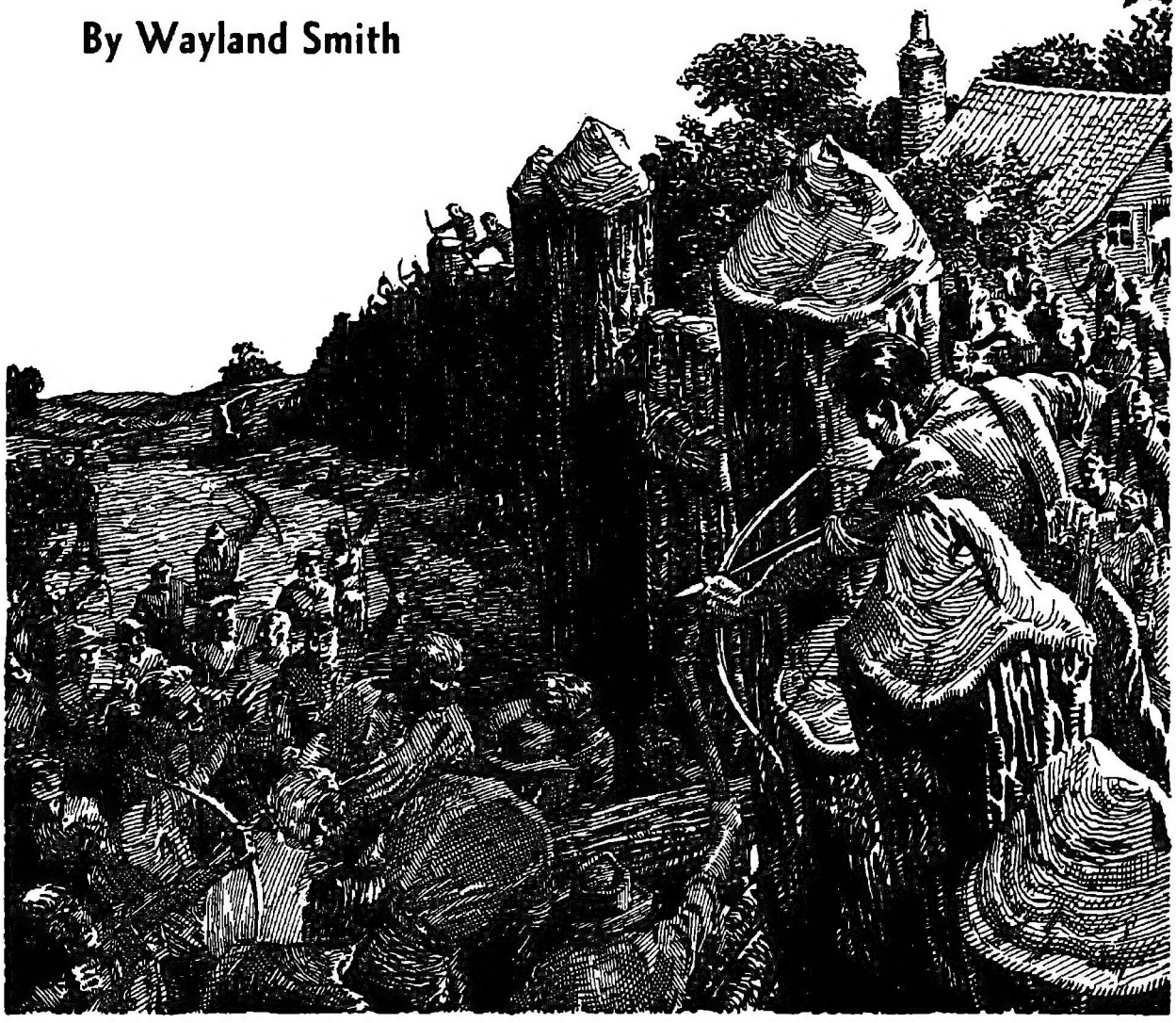
THE MACHINE STOPS

By Wayland Smith



CHAPTER I

MUTTERING OF THE STORM

THE hand of Professor Murgatroyd shook slightly as he tied his white tie in front of the mirror. He was going to dine quietly in his flat before going on to the Annual Conversazoine of the Institution of Civil Engineers, of which he was the president. He was not looking forward to this important function with any great pleasure. He would meet everyone in London who was distinguished in the scientific and engineering world, would shake hands and murmur a few words of greeting as they filed in an endless stream before him.

All his professional friends would be there, Sir John Steel, the eminent power engineer; Bevan, the famous contractor; old Jamieson, who was building the great

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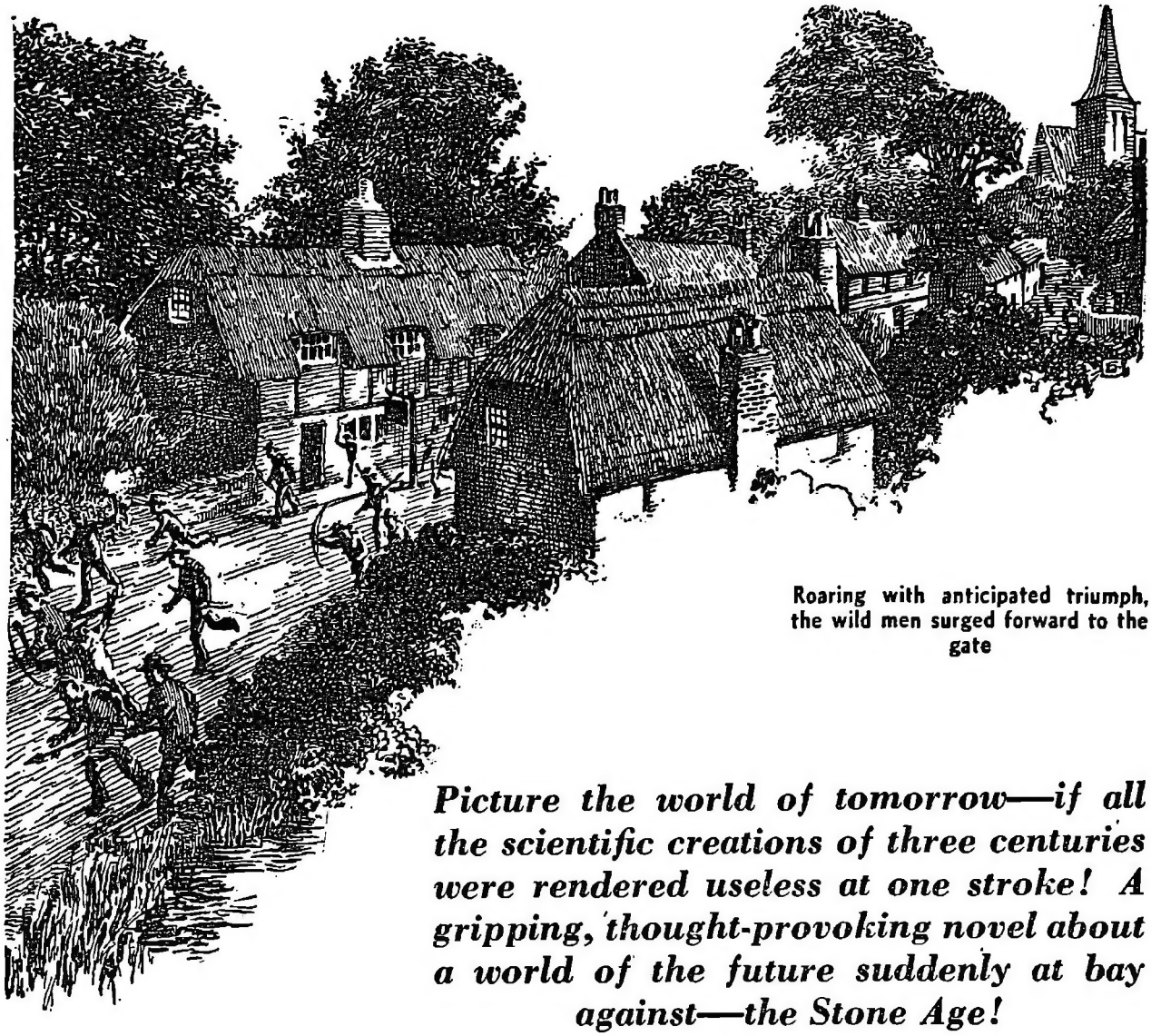

Roaring with anticipated triumph, the wild men surged forward to the gate

Picture the world of tomorrow—if all the scientific creations of three centuries were rendered useless at one stroke! A gripping, thought-provoking novel about a world of the future suddenly at bay against—the Stone Age!

Severn Bridge—his strained face relaxed a little at the thought of old Jamieson—and he would stand at the top of the stairs in the magnificent Institution building receiving them all, the head of his profession. A proud moment for an ambitious man at the zenith of his career.

It was a fine summer evening, and Murgatroyd went to the window of his comfortable bedroom at the top of a large block of flats. The weather was calm and warm but the presence of a yellow haze spoiled the view. The weather had been the same for weeks, cloudless still days marred by a yellow haze. People complained of it and said that they felt stifled. The murk seemed thicker than usual this evening and the darkness fell before its due time.

As he looked out over London lights were being switched on everywhere. One by one the buildings glowed with internal light, while the faint roar of the great city filled his ears. An ash-tray on his dressing-table chattered faintly in response to the slight vibration of the building. The faint whine of the lift came to his ears as he watched the flickering of a colored advertisement flashing its monotonous message. The street far below was alive with crawling cars and, below the street, he could visualize the tangle of pipes and conduits which made the life of the city possible. Below them again were the tube railways. . . Murgatroyd broke off his train of thought with a gesture of impatience.

"Machinery!" he muttered. "Machines everywhere, each one dependent on the other."

He turned from the window, finished dressing, and went into the sitting-room where his man had thoughtfully set out the sherry decanter and an evening paper beside the arm-chair. He switched on the lights and quickly looked through the

paper. Nothing in it, beyond the usual compendium of commonplace events, which not even the usual scare headlines and sub-titles could magnify into a passing interest. He paused for a moment over news of another unexplained boiler explosion, and a brief editorial calling attention to the unusual number of these accidents during the last few weeks. As he read, the lights suddenly flickered, glowed dull red for a few moments, and then went out.

His man came in almost at once with candles. "I had them ready, sir," he explained. "That's the third time this week the light has failed."

"Indeed?" replied the professor, sitting up with quickened interest. "Why?"

"My brother, sir, works at a power station. He says they have been having a lot of trouble with the turbine blades during the last week or so."

"What sort of trouble?"

"My brother says they can't understand it at all. The blades are badly corroded, sir, and they are hard put to it to keep sufficient sets running to maintain a service. The other big power stations in London are having the same trouble, so that they can't come to each other's help when they have to shut down a turbine. That's why I laid in a stock of candles, sir. Dinner is served, sir."

MURGATROYD made an effort to dine. But all his forebodings came flooding back. Suppose he were right! Suppose his deductions from the data he had received from all over the world were correct! Suppose he published his conclusions to the world! Such a publication over the signature of Professor Murgatroyd occupying the Chair of Applied Metallurgy at London University could not be disregarded. Would there be quite a little panic or would he be derided as a foolish old professor with a bee in his bonnet?

Curious that no one else had come to the same conclusions. Mosckowski in Warsaw was making researches on the same lines as himself; they had corresponded, but Mosckowski had given no hint that he even suspected the truth. Perhaps he, too, had locked the secret in his heart, fearing the consequence of publication to the world. Perhaps he, too, was frantically searching for a cure for this frightful molecular disintegration of the ferrous metals which was taking place with increasing rapidity. There *must* be some cure!

As he ate, Murgatroyd read Thompson's letter through again. He was one of the professor's assistants, a brilliant mathematician with a flair for research. He had just returned from a short holiday in Bermuda, where he had, at the professor's request, made some observations on the behavior of certain metals under tropical conditions. So young Thompson suspected something! There was no doubt about it. He would be at the Conversazione among the brilliant assembly; no chance for more than a few words, but they could arrange a meeting the next day. There was something urgent in young Thompson's hurried note, asking insistently for such a meeting. "Urgent matter of great importance arising out of my observations in Bermuda" was what he said. Why didn't he say straight out what it was? Perhaps he, too, was a little afraid of facing the logical consequences of his deductions, or it might be that the youngster was afraid of being laughed at. Well, Murgatroyd would soon know.

The chauffeur was peering into the open bonnet, as the professor came out of the entrance to the block of flats.

"Anything wrong?"

"Well, sir, there oughtn't to be. She's practically a new car, only done ten thousand miles, but I'll swear there's a piston slap in all six cylinders or else loose rings. Just listen for yourself, sir."

It was true that the engine was making a queer noise.

"She's not pulling like she ought to and she's using too much oil. It's very odd, sir, and I'm not the only driver that's complaining. There's a lot of trouble round at the garage with customers complaining of their cars. They don't know what to make of it. Oh, she'll run all right, but you're not getting proper service from the engine, if you know what I mean, sir."

"Well, we'll see how she gets on. I don't want the car laid up at present. The Institution, please."

And soon they were gliding down Constitution Hill and along Birdcage Walk to Great George Street, where the car drew up at the door of the palatial home of the Members of the Institution of Civil Engineers. A canopy had been stretched over the pavement and the police were busy marshaling the stream of arrivals. A knot of sightseers had collected on the opposite pavement, staring with interest at the celebrities stepping from their cars.

Murgatroyd went through the entrance hall, where a string band was playing, to

the private rooms at the back of the building reserved for members of the council and their friends. He had come early so as to be in good time for the reception, and there was no one about except a few Institution officials with whom he remained chatting for a time. Then some of the council arrived bringing their guests with them, and a genial babble of conversation arose.

But Murgatroyd was not left in peace for long. The time had come for the reception to begin and he had to go upstairs to take up his position at the head of the stairs. Then the endless procession of guests began. Their names were called out by a red-coated official as they advanced one by one to receive a warm hand-shake and a few words of welcome from the renowned president.

"Sir John and Lady Steel."

"Hullo, Steel. Glad to see you both."

"I can't stay long. I've had an urgent call from Barking. Trouble in one of the turbines. An awful bore, but they were insistent; seemed quite alarmed and refused to talk about it over the phone. See you tomorrow at the committee meeting."

"Mr. and Mrs. Burton."

"How do you do?"

"Mr. Charles Straker."

"How do you do?"

"Mr. and Miss Davidson."

"How do you do?"

"Mr. Jamieson."

"Aweel, here you are, laddie, at the top of the stairs and at the top of your profession. You should be a proud man the day."

Murgatroyd paused in his mechanical task and shook Jamieson warmly by the hand. There was real affection between the two men.

"All well at the Severn Bridge? But I needn't ask."

"Oh aye, I'm sleeping well o' nights. And what about you? Eh, laddie? Your friends are beginning to talk."

"Talk? What about?"

"Aweel, there's an auld Scottish loon that's fond of ye, and thinks you ought to take a holiday. He's just a domned fule, of course, but there's a chance he may be right."

"He usually is right, but. . . ."

"Weel, I'll be seeing you at the committee meeting tomorrow. By the way, I hear the *Clarion* is coming out tomorrow with a scare article about my bridge. They say I am incurring unjustifiable risks with my new technique. Damned fools! It's just common sense to use high tensile steel. New technique! It'll be a standard practice in the near future. And that poor creature Bevan has been blethering to me too. But I mustn't block the way."

JAMIESON passed on and was merged into the crowd. Israelovitch was giving a recital at ten, and people were already taking their places in the concert room.

"His Worship the Mayor of Westminster."

"Mr. and Mrs. Bentley."

"Mr. Alan Thompson."

Murgatroyd gripped the hand of his assistant and spoke a few words with him about his holiday. Thompson answered briefly but was clearly ill at ease.

"Did you get my letter, sir?"

"Yes. Come and see me tomorrow morning at half past ten."

"It's terrible," he burst out, "if what I fear is true. But it can't be true. I *must* tell you. . ."

"I know."

"You know?"

"Yes, I am afraid so."

"But how can you? . It's about those plates of Iridium X alloy you gave me to expose in Bermuda. It's no ordinary corrosion, it's some subtle molecular change. I've brought them back. I hadn't the necessary apparatus with me. It's frightening. I. . ."

"Steady, my boy, steady. We'll face this thing together tomorrow morning. We can't go into it now."

"No, of course not. I'm sorry."

"Go and listen to Israelovitch. I know how fond you are of music. Tomorrow at half past ten at the laboratory."

"Colonel and Mrs. Schofield."

"How do you do?"

And so it went on, till Murgatroyd's arm ached again; but at last the stream slackened and the professor felt he could leave his post and circulate among the guests. But all the time Thompson's hurried words about Iridium X alloy rang in his ears. This was the alloy old Jamieson was using in the Severn Bridge cantilevers on the president's recommendations. How could he face Jamieson with this terrible knowledge locked in his breast? He met a few friends among the throng and managed to keep up a polite conversation with them. He formed the center of a little group wherever he went for he was deservedly popular as well as distinguished. The secretary of the Institution hovered around, bringing up the more important

guests for a few words with the eminent president.

All the time the professor's mind was straying from the social needs of the moment to the urgent problem of the frightful event that was threatening civilization. For he knew that his discovery involved nothing less than that. And all the time he had to keep up a smiling appearance before this chattering crowd, laughing and talking gayly in complete ignorance that the very foundation of their civilization was crumbling beneath them with an insidious and ever-growing rapidity. The molecular disintegration of iron! It was incredible, he told himself repeatedly, and yet too horribly true.

The door of the concert room opened and the audience came flooding out, adding to the congestion in the main rooms; a congestion which was relieved to some extent by a surge in the direction of the refreshment room and a lesser flow toward the lecture room where a popular scientist was due to appear.

Murgatroyd went and thanked Israelovitch for coming. The Russian smiled with pleasure.

He was a likable little man. "I cannot complain of my reception tonight," he said. "Your applause was generous and sincere. But I will tell you a little secret. Your piano is flat. Yes. I do not think anyone noticed it, but the sensitive ear of a professional man cannot be deceived, any more than the eye of a great engineer like yourself can be deceived by his instruments. It was a very slight matter but every note was the merest trifle flat."

The secretary interposed, with great concern, that the piano had been tuned that very morning by a man from the makers.

"So?" exclaimed Israelovitch in surprise. "That is indeed a mystery. But I am not mistaken. Listen." And he struck a note, listening attentively. "Yes, I am right. It is very strange."

Murgatroyd started. Had the sensitive ear of the artist detected a subtle indication of the molecular change in the material of the piano wires? A change which had taken place in some twelve hours? If so, the rate of disintegration must be accelerating, and the danger was advancing with increasing velocity.

"Are you quite sure?" he asked Israelovitch. "Forgive me for the question, but the matter may be of importance in an investigation I am making. I am a metallurgist, you know."

"I am quite sure. It is a mystery, I repeat. The tuner cannot have been at fault. The firm employs only reliable men, as I know well. To me it is a mystery, but to you, no. You will make a few tests with your instruments and, pouf, there is no more mystery."

THEY talked a little longer about indifferent subjects and then Israelovitch departed. No one beside Murgatroyd seemed to be aware of the significance of their brief conversation, but to him it was additional evidence of the approaching disaster. He was roused from a train of thought by Bevan, who greeted him noisily and effusively.

"Hearty congratulations, my dear fellow. I haven't been able to get near you the whole evening. Well, everything has gone off splendidly. Though, if you don't mind my saying so, people don't want to listen to a damned fellow playing the piano. They can get that on the wireless if they like. By the way, do you mind if I don't come to the committee meeting tomorrow?"

Murgatroyd thought for a moment. The committee, to which Bevan referred, was a small but important one which had been investigating the corrosion of ferrous metals in sea water. Their report was ready and they were to meet on the morrow to sign it after a final discussion. Steel and Jamieson were the other two members of the committee and they had already intimated their intention of coming to the meeting. Murgatroyd made up his mind.

"I should be much obliged if you would come, Bevan. I may have something of urgent importance to communicate."

Bevan showed surprise. "What can there be urgent or important about corrosion? What *is* urgent and important is the mad folly of that fellow Jamieson. If you are going to raise that question, I'll be there with pleasure. He'll have a crash and bring discredit on the whole profession. I think the Institution as a body ought to restrain him—"

Murgatroyd cut him short and, with a repeated request that he would come to the meeting next day, he turned away. He did not like Bevan, though he admitted that he was a skillful builder of dams. Bevan had several great works to his credit in the Sudan and Abyssinia, but that hardly entitled him to adopt a censorious attitude toward Jamieson, whose specialty was long-span steel bridges. Jamieson resented these attacks and Murgatroyd sympathized with him.

The crowd began to thin out as more and more people went home. The president felt free to go home too and he moved here and there saying good night to his friends. Jamieson came and spoke to him, and drew him aside for a chat. He liked the stocky little Scot with his whimsical affectation of speaking broad Scotch, a trick he used in order to conceal his emotion when he was strongly moved. Jamieson linked his arm in Murgatroyd's and led him to an alcove where they could talk undisturbed.

Curious eyes followed them, for they were both well known and justly renowned men. The Severn Bridge, carrying both road and railway at a soaring height over the estuary, had captured the public imagination and the progress of the work was being followed with eager interest. The central arch of record span was approaching completion, and in a few weeks the two halves would meet and the last link would be inserted. It was an anxious time for the engineers but Jamieson showed no sign of strain. He laid his hand on Murgatroyd's knee.

"Won't you tell your old friend what alls you?"

Murgatroyd did not reply for a moment. He was sorely tempted to confide his fears to the other man, but something restrained him. He must have final proof before committing himself to such an alarming theory. Jamieson would understand at once all its terrible implications and would immediately demand how Iridium X alloy was affected. At present he had only young Thompson's disjointed words and pallid, scared face as evidence.

"I am worried about something, it's true. But I can't tell you now."

"There's two kinds of trouble. Private and professional. I'm not going to pry into matters that don't concern me. But I'm an old friend and maybe that gives me the right to be a wee bit impertinent."

"I've no private worries of any account. It's a professional matter. I'm on the brink of a discovery which makes me afraid. If I am right, we are up against the most terrible thing you can imagine. Sooner or later I shall know for certain. Till then I must carry this burden alone."

Jamieson regarded his friend oddly. "That's a queer thing to be said by an eminent professor. You're not the sort of man to indulge in scaremongering. Do you mean that the Institution is heading for

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trouble? Is this Bevan worrying you?"

"No, no, nothing of the sort. Please don't question me. I've been going through this evening with my brain on fire with foreboding. I don't know how I've got through it."

"You showed no sign, except to me who knows you so well."

"Every little thing seems to confirm my fears. Even Israelovitch said. . . ."

Jamieson again gave his companion a queer look. "Are ye no' feelin' well at all, laddie?" he asked gently, with his twinkling blue eyes on the strained countenance of his friend.

Murgatroyd pulled himself together: "Forgive me," he muttered, "I think I'll go home."

"I'll come with ye."

"You'll be at the meeting tomorrow?"

"Aye, to be sure I will. But ye'd better stay in bed. We can get on fine without ye."

"Listen. I am expecting confirmation of my fears tomorrow morning. If I am right, I will make a communication of the greatest importance at the meeting. There'll be you, Bevan and Steel, and you must share this dreadful knowledge with me and help me to decide what to do. Though I have little doubt myself."

"Aye, aye, we'll do that. Dinna worry yourself, and try to sleep sound. Rest and a good holiday is what you want, laddie, once ye've told us of your trouble. Now come along home." And he gently piloted the president out of the throng, skillfully warding off all those who would have detained him. "Poor old Murgatroyd," he mused. "I wonder if I could get him to see a doctor. Overworking in that laboratory of his when he ought to be in bed, I expect," and he clicked his tongue in reprobation of such folly.

JAMIESON lived on Wimbledon Common, and his way lay along King's Road and over Putney Bridge. He was glad to be going home reasonably early for he had no liking for late nights; his wife would be waiting up for him and they would have a cup of cocoa before going to bed. His thoughts slid away from Murgatroyd and his strange behavior and dwelt pleasantly on the quiet half hour he would spend with Maggie. He wondered if she could prevail on the president to go away for a voyage. He'd talk it over with her when he got home.

He was brusquely roused by a cry of alarm from the chauffeur and a metallic clangor that increased to an appalling crash, and then died into silence. The car skidded wildly as the chauffeur crammed on his brakes; fortunately there was little traffic about at this late hour and they came to a stop without mishap.

"Gawd!" muttered the white-faced chauffeur. "Lucky I saw it coming. If this yellow fog had been thicker, we'd have been into it."

Jamieson leaped nimbly out of the car. He saw at once what had happened. A large steel-framed building was being erected in Putney High Street and they were working at night under the glare of powerful electric lights which still shone with cold brilliance on twisted girders and the remains of a shattered lorry. High above all, a slender sky-pointing derrick had been busily hoisting joists and girders into position. Now it stood strangely forlorn, with its hoisting rope dangling in a loose tangle in mid-air. The rope had parted, dropping the load with brutal violence onto the lorry, whence it had been lifted.

The stunned silence which succeeded the accident was broken by shouts of alarm. A whistle blew and men came running from all sides, swarming down the scaffolding to where a hideous pile of distorted steel lay unnaturally in the roadway; a grisly pile, whence a dark sinister stain was beginning to creep across the road. Somewhere there rose a moaning cry for help which sharpened horribly to a scream and then died away. Windows were flung up and a confused crowd of helpers swarmed round the wreckage, willing to help but not knowing what to do.

Just as a train of ants whose path is obstructed breaks up in confusion while the insects scurry here and there in bewilderment, so the stream of traffic in both directions ceased its regular smooth transit and swirled helplessly, while some drivers tried to back out of the newly created cul-de-sac and others essayed to turn. The more curious among the belated travelers left their cars to add to the block, pressing forward to see what they could of the disaster. But police began to arrive and take control. An ambulance announced its arrival with the silvery tinkle of its bell; cars were hastily parked to one side on the pathway under police direction, to enable the shining white vehicle to reach the neighborhood of that ugly stain in the road. The more strident clamor of a fire bell quickly cleared a passage for the gleaming engine. Not

that there was any danger of fire, but the firemen were experts at raising and clearing wreckage, for which purpose they carried the necessary jacks and other appliances.

The work of rescue began rapidly with quiet efficiency. The workmen from the building were rapidly organized under a foreman into a relief gang, and the splutter of oxy-acetylene with its blinding glare showed where the twisted steelwork was being quickly cut free from the fantastic shape into which the girders had knotted themselves.

The police had by now cleared away all sightseers from the immediate neighborhood of the accident. A doctor was in attendance with a nurse and stretcher-bearers. Jamieson was stopped by a policeman as he advanced, but his card and the disclosure of his identity was enough to secure for him a free passage to where a badly shaken foreman was making a statement to a police inspector. The constable introduced Jamieson to the inspector, and the foreman eagerly caught at his name.

"Mr. Jamieson of the Severn Bridge?" he gasped in distress. "I'm glad you're here. I've made a statement. It's terrible. I wouldn't have had this happen for anything. They'll blame me."

"Now, now, never mind all that," said the inspector. "What I want to know is. . ."

"But I've told you everything. I keep on telling you the rope broke. It's rotted clean away. I can't help that. Mr. Jamieson, won't you help me? Come and see for yourself. ."

"Excuse me, Inspector, but I do know a little about the routine that has to be observed in regard to hoisting tackle."

"I'm sure you do, sir, and I should be grateful if you would help us."

"With pleasure. The necessary certificate of testing and the last date of test and its result can be produced tomorrow by the contractors. I think it is of importance that you should see the fractured ends as soon as possible after the accident and if you wish me to do so I will come and inspect them with you and make a statement."

The inspector readily agreed and the unhappy foreman was loud in his expressions of relief. "That's all I want. Come and see for yourself. I've never seen anything like it, sir, in all my life. Clean rotted through, it is. . ."

The broken end of the wire rope was lying forlornly in the road. It had broken about twenty feet above the crane hook to which it was still attached. The foreman pounced upon it and held up the frayed ends of the strands with a dramatic gesture. Jamieson quickly examined the fractures with an alert interest, which stiffened into startled attention. Corrosion? Oddly enough the spare figure of Professor Murgatroyd came into his mind. "An urgent and important communication. . ." Jamieson pulled himself up sharply.

"I should like to see the other broken end," he said.

THE craneman was still at his post in his cabin high above everyone. He could be seen, a diminutive figure, leaning out of his shelter, illuminated by the bright glare of an electric lamp. The foreman gave a shrill whistle and signaled to him. The tiny figure acknowledged the signal and disappeared from view. After a short pause the broken end of the hoisting rope came dangling down out of the darkness and stopped a few feet above the ground. The foreman grabbed at it, gave one look and then held it for Jamieson to see. Even as he essayed to hold the swinging rope still, some of the strands broke like rotten twigs in his grasp.

"Gawd! Look at that," he muttered.

Jamieson stared, fascinated, at the fractured strands. He asked for a light and the inspector shone his torch, while the famous engineer examined the steel through a small pocket magnifying glass. He remained so long staring that the inspector grew impatient.

"Well, sir?" he asked.

"The foreman is right. This is entirely beyond anything I have ever experienced."

The foreman drew a quick breath of relief. "Could you give me a statement to that effect for my employers? I'm afraid of losing my job over this, and jobs are hard to come by nowadays."

"Well, Inspector, what do you think? There will, of course, have to be an inquest, and I don't want to butt in. The contractors will want to employ their own experts."

The inspector was sympathetic and helpful. "As you yourself said, the result of an examination of the cause of the accident immediately after the event is important evidence. If you would care to make a brief statement of the results of your inspection, I can let the foreman have a copy for his own use."

The foreman was profuse in his expressions of gratitude and mopped his agitated brow. "Though what you're going to re-

port beats me. The steel is clean rotted away."

"Exactly, that's what I shall say. But I'll put it in more scientific language for the inspector."

Jamieson's report was quickly entered in the inspector's notebook and, attended by the grateful foreman, Jamieson made his way back to his car. As they passed the wreckage, a huddled shape was being lifted from among a twisted mass of steelwork. The doctor gave a quick look and shook his head. A slight sigh came from the bystanders, and they silently removed their hats in a last salute to the poor battered body, which was quickly covered with a tarpaulin. A murmur of sympathy arose as another form was lifted out. This time the doctor and nurse, with two ambulance men, rendered first aid, and within a few minutes the helpless form had been lifted gently into the ambulance, which disappeared into the darkness.

By this time a passageway had been cleared for traffic and the stream of cars began to move in both directions. The firemen packed up their tools and the great engine swung around and departed. Somewhere the chatter of a pneumatic riveter showed that the interrupted work was being resumed. The contractors were working to a contract date and they were already behind-hand. Sightseers melted away, windows were closed, and the good citizens of Putney resumed their interrupted slumbers. Only the silent shape under a tarpaulin remained awaiting removal to the mortuary. The twisted girders and the shattered lorry were being rapidly dismantled and removed. By morning everything would be clear and the work would go on as usual.

As usual? Jamieson thoughtfully entered his car. He could not rid his mind of the memory of the strained face of Professor Murgatroyd and his promise of a communication of urgent importance at the meeting tomorrow. The utterly unprecedented fracture of the hoisting rope he had just seen—was it something to do with the promised communication or was he merely growing fanciful at this late hour?

"Save us," he muttered, "it was just rotted through. The steel was greenish-blue right through. A bad case of corrosion. The strands just crumbled in my fingers like—like—" He could not think of an exact simile. Like the end of a pencil, he thought. Hard and yet brittle. Corrosion? He had never seen corrosion like that. He made up his mind to get in touch with the experts, who would almost certainly be called in to examine the fractured rope. If steel was going to behave like that, engineers would have to take precautions.

His wife, Maggie, was waiting up for him. The chauffeur had very sensibly telephoned from the scene of the accident and she was not anxious. The cocoa was piping hot and the two old folks enjoyed their half hour in spite of the late hour. Jamieson described the accident to his wife but said nothing about the fracture. Somewhere at the back of his trained mind, that uncomfortable fact was recorded as a matter of tremendous importance. He was a wee bit thoughtful over the second half of his cup of cocoa, and Maggie, thinking he was bothered by some knotty problem connected with the Severn Bridge, did not press him to talk.

"Bed," he announced, "that's the place for us old bodies. It's a warm night again."

"Yes, dear, and that horrid yellow fog is worse than ever. It makes everything in the house filthy. What is it due to?"

"I can't say. The meteorologists are puzzled. They say it is quite unprecedented for us to have such a long stretch of hot and foggy weather." He stopped suddenly. Illogically, the spare figure of Murgatroyd came into his mind again with his mysterious words of warning which Jamieson had attributed to overwork. A sudden chill of fear and foreboding swept over him.

"What is it, dear?"

"Nothing, nothing. Let's go to bed."

CHAPTER II

THE STORM BURSTS

MURGATROYD and Alan Thompson were sitting in the office and record room attached to the professor's laboratory. They had been busily engaged examining a mass of data. Works of reference lay open beside them, and some bulky files of records had been taken from the shelves and spread out on the table and on the floor.

"It's incredible," Thompson burst out, "it can't be true."

Murgatroyd smiled sadly. "Incredible, yes. But none the less there is no escaping the results of our observations and the deductions from them."

"But why, why? The world is familiar with the idea of the radio-active elements breaking down into other substances. So long as this process was confined to rare

metals, people expressed a polite interest and left the matter to scientists to investigate. It seemed to be a wise provision of Nature to work marvels of that kind in an obscure way, without involving ordinary men in any trouble. But now iron, iron of all things, has suddenly started to break down into something else. Why, why, why?"

"Not only iron. The non-ferrous metals seem to be affected also, but to nothing like the same degree. But it is the disintegration of iron that the human race will have to face up to. It is the hideous rapidity of the onset of this malady that scares me. Time is needed to try and find a remedy, but it looks as if time will not be vouchsafed to us."

"There must be some cure. There must, there must."

"Steady, lad, steady. We must think this out quietly and dispassionately, as men of science."

"I know, sir, but it's frightful. Look at this curve I have plotted from the Bermuda test pieces. The rate of deterioration is accelerating along a cubic parabola! Think what that means. In a few weeks, perhaps a few days. . . ."

"This thing cannot be hidden much longer. At present there is a certain amount of alarm at the number of accidents occurring to machinery, but the truth is not even suspected. I shall see my colleagues this afternoon on the committee that has been studying corrosion and acquaint them with the facts.

"It was not till I went to Bermuda that I felt certain. This terrible rotting of iron is greatly accentuated in the tropics and they are already alarmed in the island. The engineers are hastily putting on extra coats of paint. Paint!" He laughed bitterly. "This is no case of ordinary corrosion, and painting has no effect."

"No, of course not. We must seek a cure in other directions. What troubles me is this. We know that nothing can hasten or retard the rate of emission of rays and emanations from radio-active substances. In high or low temperatures, under high pressure, in strong or weak electric or magnetic fields, the emission just goes steadily on unregardful of man's efforts to affect it. Nothing hastens it and"—he paused for a moment to make his words more impressive—"nothing retards it."

Thompson looked up in alarm. "Do you mean that it is hopeless to look for a cure?"

"No. Iron is a much lighter metal than the radio-active elements. Under certain circumstances, I can conceive a possibility that the disintegrating process could be arrested, if not stopped. But this would be a complicated and expensive affair, and I think our hope lies rather in finding a new metal, which shall be immune from this universal rot."

A new hope shone in Thompson's eyes.

"A new metal?"

"Yes. There are many other metals besides iron. They are most of them too rare or too unsuitable for man's requirements to act as a substitute for iron and steel. But there may be hitherto undiscovered alloys of other metals, which will prove to be better than steel. Aluminum exists in great quantities everywhere. An alloy of aluminum and some other ingredient may be the salvation of mankind!"

"But is aluminum immune from the rot?"

"Not in its present form. But I have an idea that it might be made so. I can't explain now, as I must be getting along to the committee meeting."

SIR JOHN STEEL was the first to arrive at the committee room at the Institution of Civil Engineers. He was rather tired after a very late night. He had spent some hours at the Barking power station in anxious consultation with the resident engineer, who was frankly puzzled, not to say alarmed, at the condition of one of the turbine sets which had been opened up for inspection. Several of the blades had stripped clean off and the color of the fractures was peculiar. The color was greenish-blue. Sir John attributed this to some defect in the quality of the steel, and he intended to address a sharp remonstrance to the builders of the turbine, a world-famous firm; in fact he contemplated bringing an action against them for damages. Sir John was feeling anxious and uneasy, and he would not have come to the meeting had he not wanted to see Murgatroyd on the subject of these turbine blades. A greenish-blue fracture! He had never seen anything like it before. If this sort of thing went on. .

The secretary came in and greeted Sir John.

"I've kept the windows shut, Sir John, to try and keep this confounded fog out. But it isn't much use. The damned thing permeates everywhere. It's on my nerves."

"It *is* stuffy in here, but I suppose you are right. It would be worse if we opened the windows."

"It's worse today than usual. I feel as if I can't breathe. It's unnatural. I feel. . . ."

"What?"

"I can hardly say. I'm not quite fit, I suppose, but I feel a sense of impending disaster. . ."

Sir John regarded the agitated secretary with amusement, not untinged with contempt. "My dear fellow, you take a liver pill and you'll find all your morbid fancies will disappear."

The secretary sat huddled in his chair, fidgeting with the pencil and paper in front of him. He mopped his forehead and complained again about the heat, nervously gulping down a glass of water. He started violently when the door opened suddenly to admit Bevan, who entered breezily.

"Morning, morning." He nodded to the two men. "Our last meeting, eh? Got the report ready for signature? Good. Then we can all go home early. Frankly I wouldn't have come unless Murgatroyd had specially asked me to."

The secretary looked up in surprise. "I had a note from him too. I don't understand it at all. There's no business on the agenda, except the formal signing of our report, and that won't take long."

Bevan sniggered. "I think I know what it is about."

"What!"

"Oh, yes. I've spoken once or twice to him already about it, and I think he is going to take action at last about that mad fool Jamieson. And high time, too."

"Nonsense!"

"It's not nonsense at all. I had a long talk with him last night, and I certainly gathered the impression that he intended to raise the matter. Of course he will be glad to have my support, and I shall give it most willingly. I venture to think that my protests will add weight to the president's remonstrance. Jamieson is bringing discredit on the whole profession."

"Oh, come, come, that's a bit too strong."

"Look here, Steel, you must support us over this. You wouldn't dream of taking risks, as Jamieson is doing, in any of your power stations. You have a duty to the public, as well as to your board, and so has that mad fool."

Sir John hesitated. "I don't see how the Institution can interfere. Jamieson is a sound man. ."

"Bah!"

". . and has a great many works of outstanding importance to his credit. He has the confidence of his directors and the support of many eminent men."

"The Severn Bridge is no ordinary bridge. The whole country has followed the progress of the work with the closest interest. It's the largest bridge in the world and it has the longest span. A disaster to the Severn Bridge would be a national disaster. A crash there would resound through the world and shake confidence in British engineering. And yet, in face of this, you say that the outrageous folly of that man is not a matter for the Institution. I repeat that it is, and I will go further and say that it is a matter for the government."

"But what action could we take?"

"He should be forced to disclose the stresses he is allowing in the main struts of the central arch, and also in the temporary anchors. I venture to think that we should be staggered. I've heard one or two things which have positively scared me. The Severn Bridge, the greatest bridge in the world, should be constructed without any risk whatsoever."

"You must not overlook that Jamieson is using a special alloy steel. That justifies a much higher working stress than usual."

"I know, Iridium X. An entirely untried material."

"Hardly untried, my dear fellow. There were exhaustive tests and the contractors have given stringent guarantees."

"You can't build a big bridge on the results of a few laboratory tests and a contractor's paper guarantees!"

"I think I should trust a recommendation by Murgatroyd. It was on that, that the bridge company decided to adopt Iridium X steel."

"Aided and abetted by that mad—"

"Hush!"

THE door opened to admit Jamieson. His normal cheerfulness was ruffled and he had an angry sparkle in his bright blue eyes. "Phoo! It's foggy in here. Can't we have a window open?"

"I kept them closed," the secretary explained, "to try and keep out this horrible fog."

"Aye, but ye can no' keep it out, any more than you can keep out these reporter chaps. The damned fools!"

He threw a crumpled newspaper on the table in disgust. The scare headlines stared brazenly at them, as the other men bent curiously over it.

"Severn Bridge Endangered. Risk of Grave Disaster. Possible Government Intervention," they read.

"Have ye ever seen the like? It's an outrage."

"Well, Jamieson, I deprecate these press attacks, but I must say I sympathize to some extent. . ."

"Oh, ye do, do ye? I thought maybe ye'd written the article yourself."

Bevan flushed. "Really, Jamieson, I must protest," he stammered.

"Oh aye, protest if it'll help your conscience. But it doesn't affect what I'm thinking. You're always bickering. ."

"Nothing of the kind. I'm jealous of the reputation of our profession, and I consider it my duty. "

". to be always sniveling and sniggering. . ."

"Aweel, I'm a wee bit worried and anxious, and I dare say I spoke a wee bit too sharply."

Bevan laughed shortly. "I don't wonder that you are feeling anxious," he said nastily.

"Oh, I'm not worrying about the bridge, if that's what you mean. I saw Murgatroyd last night. There's something badly wrong."

The secretary looked up sharply. "Something wrong. That's what I say. Something wrong somewhere."

"What do you mean?" asked Steel.

"He spoke as if there was some calamity hanging over him, over us all, and he said he would make an important communication at the meeting today."

The secretary drew his breath in sharply and twisted his hands nervously. "Today," he muttered, "it's coming today."

"Now Murgatroyd is not the man to start scaremongering like these press fools. No, he is not himself. He is on the edge of a breakdown, or else. . ." He paused.

The secretary stared at him, fascinated. "Or else he is right, and there is something?"

"Aye, it's a possibility. He is either out of his senses or else he has discovered something which affects us all."

The four men fell silent as the bowed figure of the president entered.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen."

They murmured greetings in reply. Murgatroyd hung up his hat and turned to go to his chair at the head of the table, but as he turned he went white and staggered slightly. Jamieson was at his side in an instant.

"Man, ye're not well!" he cried. "Better go home and rest awhile."

"Thank you," gasped the president, sinking into his chair. "I am quite well. Can I have a glass of water? Thank you, thank you."

The four men hesitated for a moment and then silently took their places at the table.

"I must apologize for my momentary weakness. I did not sleep very well last night. I have not been sleeping well for some time. I lie awake thinking of—thinking what I ought to do, what we must all do. ." His voice trailed off weakly.

Jamieson gave a quick look at the others and put his finger to his lips to enjoin silence.

"Take no notice," he whispered to Steel.

"Get through the business as quickly as we can, and I'll take him home. He's daft, I think."

"Forgive me, I feel better now. I must arrange my thoughts, try to tell you all."

"Shall we open the meeting?" asked the secretary. "There is only the formal business of signing the report."

"The report? It's waste paper. I shall not sign it."

THE four men stared at one another in amazement. Bevan picked up his chair and sat down again. Steel went across to the fireplace and stood there with his hands in his pockets, rocking to and fro on his heels. The secretary sat nervously playing with his useless papers, a look of apprehension on his face. Only Jamieson appeared to be unmoved, and it was he who broke the awkward silence.

"Murgatroyd, we know you, like you, and trust you. I can't make speeches. But will you just tell your friends what is troubling you? Maybe we can help, and if we can help, we shall. Are you all with me?"

There was a cordial murmur of assent.

"Shall I read the minutes of the last meeting?" muttered the secretary.

The president roused himself and a little color returned to his cheeks. He smiled gently in reply to the secretary.

"I don't think we need trouble about the minutes. Come, gentlemen, please be seated. We have business to transact—perhaps for the last time."

Steel returned to his chair and they all sat expectantly waiting for the president to begin. He extracted a bundle of diagrams from his portfolio and placed a flat parcel on the table in front of him. His strength was returning to him, and he again apologized for his weakness while they sympathized with him again.

"Listen, gentlemen. You know that for the purpose of our studies on the corrosion of metals, we exposed various samples under proper observation in certain parts of the world. Plates, bars and assorted sections, mostly of ferrous metals, were exposed and our report contains graphs giving the rate of loss of weight by corrosion. It was a slow process but, gentlemen, it is no longer slow."

The four men were listening carefully. There seemed to be nothing in the president's carefully chosen words to account for the extreme gravity with which he spoke. Only Jamieson appeared to grasp the significance of his last sentence. He looked up quickly and found the secretary staring at Murgatroyd with an expression of growing horror on his face.

"Our observations ceased officially six months ago. But I continued them as a matter of personal interest. I was merely desirous of clearing up certain minor points of no particular importance, and I had no idea that this chance action of mine would lead to a discovery so terrible in its significance that I shrank for some time from pursuing its logical consequences."

Bevan smiled easily and leaned back in his chair. He clicked his tongue sympathetically at what he considered to be evidence of the upset of the president's mental equilibrium and shook his head sadly at the others. Steel was frankly puzzled and hardly knew what to make of the president's statement.

"Terrible, Murgatroyd? What can there be terrible about corrosion? Surely you exaggerate."

"Hush, man," murmured Jamieson, "I think I begin to see. Go on, Murgatroyd."

"I discovered that an enormously accelerated rate of corrosion has set in, especially in tropical regions."

"Well, well," ejaculated Steel, "corrosion can be combated in a dozen ways. Resident engineers must be more careful, that is all."

Professor Murgatroyd smiled wearily. "When I said 'accelerated' I understated the position. It is no ordinary corrosion, and its pace is advancing by leaps and bounds. These graphs have been plotted from the observations made by several agents in various parts of the world. I have only today received results from Bermuda, which have amply confirmed those from elsewhere. Look at them, gentlemen, look at them. No words of mine are needed."

He spread out the diagrams on the table and they crowded round them. The secretary gave one look and sank back in his chair with a despairing gesture. Steel was still at a loss, but fingered the sheets with attention.

"You're right," he said, "about the acceleration. By Jove, the curve is almost a cubic parabola. What is the time scale?"

"It is marked on the diagram."

"So it is. But, my dear fellow, there must be something wrong. According to this graph, there'll be nothing left of the metal in a few months . . weeks."

"Merciful heavens," cried Steel, staring at them, "it's incredible! Murgatroyd! This can't be true. It's impossible! There must be some mistake. You've been overwork-

ing and your judgment is impaired. Why! This would mean. ." He stopped suddenly.

"Aye, laddie, that's just what I'm thinking. It would mean the end of everything."

"I have chemists working, of course. But this is something new. The metal corrodes right through without showing much external sign. The fracture is greenish-blue in color."

"What?" shrieked Steel, leaping to his feet. "That's how my turbine blades have been breaking. Greenish-blue? Yes, but that is the fault of the contractors. The steel is defective. I'm bringing an action. Greenish-blue! It's not a case of corrosion, I tell you. It can't be! Do you mean. . . .?"

MURGATROYD was undoing the flat parcel he had brought with him. The others watched his thin fingers with fascinated eyes as he untied the knots in the string.

"This is one of the plates from Bermuda. You will notice that it appears quite normal to a casual glance. Now watch!"

They crowded round him as he raised the steel plate and flung it into the fender. It shattered into fragments, as though it were glass. "Observe, gentlemen, that the color of the fracture is greenish-blue."

There was a dead silence. Then Jamieson clutched the president's arm. "Iridium X!" he croaked hoarsely. "Did you test Iridium X?"

Murgatroyd turned to him with a grave and pitying expression, for he knew that he was about to give a deadly blow to a man who was his lifelong friend.

"Yes," he answered gently. "Iridium X alloy is affected five times more than British standard mild steel."

"Five times!" gasped Jamieson. "And accelerating along a cubic parabola! My bridge!"

The president remained seated, his thin fingers clasped together on the table. Bevan burst out in triumph:

"There! What did I tell you? Jamieson, I've warned you about this again and again. You prate of your factor safety. Where is it now? Gone, and with it. . ."

"You didn't warn me about corrosion."

"That's immaterial. Your bridge is in serious danger and the responsibility rests. . . ."

"Whist with your blethering. I've a month! Three weeks, if we work treble shifts. The big stresses that frighten you are in the main anchors, temporary works for holding back the two halves of the great arch until they meet in the middle, which they will do in three weeks. The bridge is not in the tropics. There's time yet!"

But Bevan would not be appeased. "What is the stress in the main anchor?" he snapped. "You've never disclosed the figure, but I think it's time you did."

"Fifteen tons per square inch, if you want to know. Does it scare ye?"

"You mad fool! Fifteen tons per square inch! You must be insane. I couldn't sleep at night thinking of that terrific stress at work, if I were to allow such a thing in one of my works."

"It's safe enough with Iridium X alloy. Thank heaven there is time before this rot affects it. How long have I got, Murgatroyd?"

"Who can say? The disintegrating process is accelerating at a terrific pace. A few weeks maybe . . or days or hours."

They sat appalled for a moment by this statement. Then Bevan broke out again. "I am simply unable to understand such folly. You are in grave danger of a disaster which will ring through the world. Mr. President, I wish to give formal notice that in the interests of the Institution and of our profession I consider it my duty to disclose the figure that Jamieson has given us to the public and the press. I shall demand a government inquiry and the intervention of the law."

Jamieson leaped to his feet. "You little rat! You'll go sniveling to your friends on the *Daily Clarion*. Oh, I ken fine what ye've been doing in that quarter and I dare say ye're well paid."

"How dare you, sir, address me. . ."

Sir John Steel tried to intervene and pour oil on the troubled waters, but in vain. The president sat quietly and immovably, while the incensed Jamieson and the indignant Bevan wrangled violently. Then at last he spoke during a momentary pause.

"Believe me, gentlemen, though you hold diametrically opposite views on this matter, neither view is of the slightest importance."

Jamieson paused in his wrath. "Aye. I see what you mean. But it's awful to contemplate."

"At any moment the news of the first of a series of disasters may reach us."

Bevan sniffed. "My masonry works won't be affected. I gather that stone is immune from this—er—so-called deterioration of steel and iron, which I dare say is due to carelessness or negligence, as in the case of the Severn Bridge. . ."

"Man, will ye no' think, instead of blethering. ."

THE quarrel broke out again more fiercely than ever, but above the noise of it, which Steel tried vainly to quell, there was audible and insistent knocking at the door. The voice of the doorkeeper could be heard in remonstrance; the door opened a crack, and an agitated voice cried, "I tell you I must go in. Let me go!" The door suddenly burst open, and a distraught figure rushed in.

Jamieson cried out in astonishment, for it was his chief draughtsman, pale and disheveled.

"The Severn Bridge!" panted the apparition, gasping as though he had run a mile. "It's down!"

They sprang up in alarm with the exception of the president, who remained seated, bowed over his clasped hands. Jamieson strode quickly to the collapsed figure of his assistant, who had sunk huddled onto a chair.

"Tell me quickly, man. Pull yourself together."

"Brown telephoned."

"Yes, yes."

"At a few minutes after two. The main anchor parted. About a hundred and twenty men killed."

The wretched man swayed in his chair, half fainting. Jamieson held a glass of water to his chattering lips.

"The main anchor! Did they tell you—did they say anything about the fracture?"

"Yes. The metal was flawed. The fracture was greenish-blue. They could not understand it."

The tumbler of water fell from Jamieson's hand with a crash on the ground. A spreading pool of water stained the carpet, unheeded by anyone. Jamieson sat down quietly without a word beyond a muttered "My bridge! My bridge!" Steel and Bevan glanced covertly at each other, and even the latter refrained from the triumphant comment trembling on his lips. No one knew what to say to the stricken man.

Steel roused himself. "We must ascertain the facts as rapidly as we can. There may have been some accident, even foul play!"

"Don't trouble yourself. Greenish-blue! I see it all now."

"Look here, Jamieson," exclaimed Bevan, "perhaps I pressed you a bit too hard a few minutes ago! But now that this terrible accident has actually happened, you may rely on me to stand by you, as far as I can, for the honor of our profession."

The fire had been stricken out of the sturdy little Scot by the catastrophe to his bridge. He turned a mild eye on Bevan and replied, "That is a generous thing to say, and I thank you for it. But, don't you see, this is the time for us to be standing by each other?"

"Eh? What? I don't understand."

The president raised his head and sat back in his chair. The color had come back into his cheeks and he spoke with resolution.

"Now that this first disaster has fallen on us all, we must think what to do."

Bevan was still obtuse. "On us all? But my masonry structures. ."

"On the whole human race. Try and grasp that."

"Eh? What's that?"

"All iron and steel is disintegrating into a greenish-blue powder. It'll all be gone in a few weeks. Think, man, think!"

Steel started impatiently away from Bevan. "Murgatroyd! We must inform the press, warn the world. The Severn Bridge disaster will cause widespread uneasiness, and the public must be informed regarding its true cause from an authoritative quarter. Otherwise there will be something like a panic, especially if I have to curtail electricity supplies until this trouble can be cured. My turbines seem to be affected."

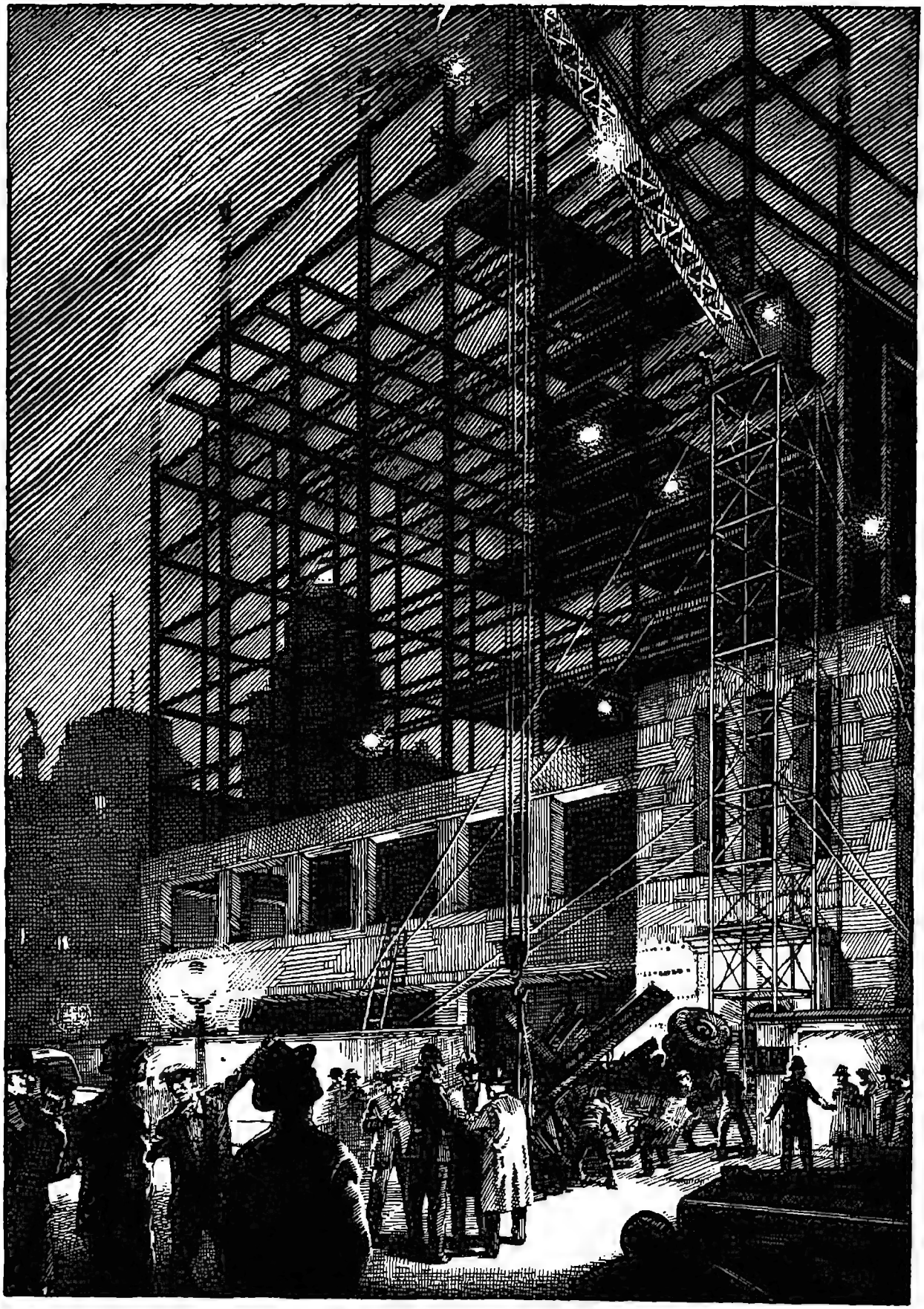
"Dinna fash yerself, laddie. Take a little more time to think it out. There are some things so big that it takes poor wee man some time to grasp them. I had an inkling last night of what was coming, and I've only just got a firm hold of it. Our president has known it for some days, God help him. We are going back to the Stone Age! Try and think what that means in modern England . in the modern world. Aweel, Murgatroyd, what are we to do?"

They all turned toward the figure of the president and murmured agreement with Jamieson's question. England going back to the Stone Age! They could not yet fully understand the significance of these few words.

"Gentlemen, I can put it in a few words. Under the guidance of our profession, England has come to depend for her food, clothing, warmth and housing upon the products of machinery. To put it in a nutshell, England is being fed by a great machine. Now that machine is going to stop!"

A murmur of horror arose, but the president continued.

"This knowledge may be suspected by



The rope had parted, dropping a heavy girder onto a passing vehicle.

others, but to us alone is it definitely known. It is our duty to impart this knowledge to the world, a duty with incalculable consequences. I decided in my own mind this morning that this was the right course, so I rang up the Press Association and asked them to send a representative here to receive a communique of great importance. I have prepared a statement for the press on the lines of the information I have given you. If you approve I propose to hand it to the gentleman from the Press Association, who is waiting outside to receive it. Is it agreed?"

"Agreed! Agreed!"

"Then will the secretary be so kind as to ask the Press gentleman to come in."

The ashy-faced secretary struggled to his feet and went out of the room. They sat in silence until he returned with an alert young man who entered briskly.

CHAPTER III

SCURRY FOR SHELTER

THE alert young man bowed slightly to the president and the other men. The president motioned him to a chair and he sat down, rather awed by the dead silence with which he was greeted.

"Good morning, Mr.—er—"

"Hatfield. John Hatfield."

"Thank you. We asked the Press Association to send a representative."

"That's right, sir. The chief told me. Your report on the corrosion of metals in sea water doesn't sound very exciting to me, but no doubt you gentlemen understand its importance more than I do."

"Yes, yes, quite so, but ."

"That's all right, sir. If you will kindly let me have a copy of the report, and a few words of explanation from yourself, we shall know how to handle it. You can leave the matter in our hands."

"I suggest that you read it carefully, Mr. Hatfield," Murgatroyd said.

"Why, sure." They watched him in silence as he read. "Whew! This is bully! All girders, steel-framed buildings, boilers, railways, steamships—all nails, screws, pins and needles—crikey, that's pretty comprehensive—all going west. This is the goods. Will you give me exclusive right to this document? There's no need for it to go through the Press Association. If you will let me handle it. . . ."

He looked round at the other occupants of the room, who still watched him in silence.

"Why can't some of you say something? Is there anything wrong? Why, this is the scoop of the century! I can sell this for . well, enough to keep me in comfort for some time. Mr. Jamieson, may I say that the Severn Bridge disaster is due to greenish-blue corrosion? Would any of you gentlemen like to add anything?"

The president regarded Hatfield gravely. "Mr. Hatfield, what will you invest the money in?"

Hatfield was rather taken aback by the president's abrupt change of subject. "The money I get for this article? Well, I'd thought of Central Steel, but I guess that's a bear market now. No, it'll have to be something else."

"For instance?"

"Well, coal is looking up."

"Coal? For what purpose?"

"Why, for all purposes. For railways—no, that won't do. Bunker coal for ships—no, of course not. No, coal won't do. I shall have to be careful."

"Well?"

"Perhaps oil-petrol, you know."

"Used in engines, made of what?"

Hatfield showed signs of annoyance and impatience at this cross-examination. "Look here, what are you getting at? I'll invest it in my own way."

"I beg your pardon, but I was really interested. Will you invest in Industrials dependent on machinery, which will be a wreck in six weeks? Buy foodstuffs imported in iron ships? Foodstuffs grown on cornlands, farmed how?"

Hatfield's face fell. He looked wildly round at the grave faces of the rest. "Do you mean," he asked slowly, "that this is really going to happen?" No one answered him and he was daunted by their silence. "In a few weeks' time?"

"Or days!"

"My God! It's really true then? All the stock markets will go to blazes. Is that it?"

No reply came. A cunning expression came into Hatfield's face. "I know," he cried, "I'll buy gold and get away for a time."

"Where will you go?"

"It doesn't matter where. Gold will buy things anywhere."

"Is there enough gold to go round? There will be others, you know."

"I'll get in first. Tomorrow! No, today! I'll go now. My God, what a smash! But, thank heaven, I'll be able to get out from under in time." He mopped an agitated

brow. "I must ask for your formal permission to use this and to quote you as author?"

"Certainly."

"Then, good day."

The president sighed. "There goes the first of them."

Bevan appeared to be rather dazed by this scene. "Eh? First of whom? And don't you think we ought to have issued that statement through the Press Assoc—"

"The wild scramble for food and clothing! Forty mililon people fighting for life in a land which can only support four millions—in the Stone Age. The horror of it!"

"Aye, mannie, I don't wonder ye couldna sleep."

At last it dawned on Bevan. Steel, too, was white-faced. Bevan leaped to his feet. "By Jove! I must have been blind. But that young fool was talking nonsense! We must lay in stocks of food and other necessaries to tide us over until things settle down again. There's no time to be lost!"

"You're right," cried Steel. "I must see my power stations are amply stcoked with fuel and all running stores. We may have to stand a siege! There'll be others at the same game. A siege! Good Lord, I wonder!"

"What? What?"

"Bevan, do you think we ought to barricade our works and arm ourselves to defend them?"

"My dear fellow, we can rely on the police. The government will not hesitate, surely, to call out the troops, if necessary, in an emergency. But come! There's no time to waste."

"I'll give you a life in my car."

MR. SIMPSON of the firm of Blunt, Simpson & Co., Stockbrokers, Throgmorton Street, entered a first-class compartment of the nine-ten with a feeling of suppressed excitement. A feeling which seemed to be shared by his fellow passengers, for, instead of hiding behind their newspapers as usual, they greeted Simpson with voluble eagerness and started an animated conversation.

"Just in time to allay a panic," said the man in the corner, grinning. "They are on the point of deciding to sell all they have, but not to give it to the poor. Now the expert from a world-famous firm of stockbrokers will calm their fears in a few well-chosen words."

"I must say," joined in an anxious-faced little man, "this statement by Professor Murgatroyd, coming on top of the Severn Bridge disaster, is very disquieting."

"Professors shouldn't mix themselves up in matters of business they don't understand," snorted the man in the corner.

"But he hasn't," bleated the anxious little man. "He has merely pointed out . but you've read what he says, I suppose."

"Never read such utter rot in my life. The papers ought not to print rubbish like that."

"I don't know about utter rot," ventured a rubicund individual, breathing heavily. "Murgatroyd has a reputation, you know. Not in my line and it doesn't affect me, except that the gee-gees will have to be plated with aluminum, instead of iron."

"Reputation my foot!" exclaimed the man in the corner scornfully. "You agree with me, don't you, Simpson?"

"Well, you know, the market for Industrials is a bit sensitive at the moment. You'd be surprised at the number of selling orders we received directly after the news of the Severn Bridge came in. And now comes Murgatroyd's statement. It's bound to shake the market all round."

"I don't say there won't be a bit of a shake-out. There are always fools ready to rush and sell, and probably send their money abroad. That's what is rattling the exchanges. There ought to be a law against it."

"I think we must expect a rush of selling orders in the coal, iron, and steel group."

"Well, there'll be plenty of buyers," commented the man in the corner. "That group has been looking up lately. I suppose you've heard those stories of a mysterious buyer in the market?"

"Mustn't ask me to disclose professional secrets," Simpson said, smiling.

"Oh, I wasn't hinting that your firm was acting for the mysterious buyer."

"He'll be able to buy cheap, if there's any sort of panic," said the anxious man. "I've got some Central Steel First Prefs. I—I don't know what I ought to do. I—er—I couldn't afford to lose the money. I confess Murgatroyd's statement was a great shock."

"Hold them!" asserted the man in the corner.

"B-but if the price slumps away to nothing! If there's a rush to sell, it's those who get in first that will get a reasonable price. I-I almost think that tomorrow I'll—"

"Bah! That's what starts a panic! Peo-

ple get scared about nothing and start selling. Bang goes the price and then more people get a fright and sell. And so it goes on, until the fright begins to subside and wise men are able to buy in at rock-bottom prices."

"Stopping again," grumbled the bookmaker. "What's up? It can't be the fog. It isn't thick enough." He slammed down the window and stared ahead.

"I wish the fog would clear," sighed the anxious little man. "It's getting on my nerves."

The train jerked forward for a few hundred yards and then came the grind of the brakes again. Windows were lowered all along the train and heads were craned out of them, but nothing could be seen.

"Must be something wrong somewhere," commented the bookmaker. "Another accident, I suppose. High time there was a government inquiry into the working of the railways."

SIMPSON was becoming worried. A very busy day in the office was in prospect, and he wanted to get everything clear so as to have a long week-end down at Bradley Parva with his friends the Dales. His face relaxed a little as his mind slid away to the peace and quiet of the little vicarage . . . and Sylvia Dale.

He was recalled to the present by the belated arrival of the train at London Bridge Station. Nearly there, he reflected, and sighed. One more station and then the short walk to Throgmorton Street. A busy day dealing with all those buying orders for Central Steel from the Claudius Syndicate, and then, all being well, by evening he would be driving his speedy car along the Oxford road on his way to Bradley Parva. His reverie reasserted itself pleasantly, but not for long. Something unusual was happening.

"What's that?" cried the man in the corner. "All change? Nonsense! It is though; everyone is getting out! Hi! Guard! What's up? Why aren't we going any farther?"

"Very sorry, sir, there's something wrong ahead. Can't hardly believe it, but they say Charing Cross Bridge is down across the Embankment."

"Good Lord! Charing Cross bridge! But it's stood for years."

"Couldn't say, sir. They'll soon have it right, I expect. Cannon Street Bridge is closed for examination too, and we're stopping all trains here for the present. Excuse me, sir. All change! All change here!"

Another train ran in and began to discharge passengers, incredulous at first, then indignant, and then . . . a shiver of apprehension seemed to run through the crowd on the platform. A sudden surge toward the narrow exit jammed the crowd, a woman screamed, the ticket collectors at the exit gates were swept aside, and something like a fight to get clear began. Charing Cross Bridge down? Then Professor Murgatroyd was perhaps right! The man in the corner fingered the Central Steel scrip he had taken out of his desk that morning and hastened toward the exit. If ony he could reach his brokers' office in time!

"Hurry up in front there," he cried, pushing his way into the crowd.

"Who are you a-shoving?" demanded a rough voice.

"Important business," gasped the man in the corner, trying to force his way through.

"You wait your turn," snarled the rough voice. "D'you think you're the only one?"

The voice of the man in the corner rose to a shriek. "I must get through! Stand out of the way! Let go! You brute!"

A sudden swirl and eddy in the struggling crowd separated the man in the corner from the two men who were threatening him. Fighting and pushing he struggled to get out of the murmuring throng that hemmed him in. God! he prayed wildly, let me get there in time! In time to sell out before the rest. The exit barriers went down with a crash and the sudden relief of pressure released the crowd, which burst outward over the wreckage. With a sob of thanksgiving the man in the corner thrust his way eagerly forward. Too eagerly! The pent-up crowd swirled onward with increasing speed, the man in the corner tripped and would have fallen but for the tight press of those round him. Then the pressure was suddenly released and he fell, staggered to his knees, fell again, while his neighbors vainly tried to avoid him. Another violent surge sent a dozen men and women trampling over him, while he screamed in agony.

The main portion of the crowd passed by, and the man in the corner struggled painfully to his feet. His head was bleeding, and the movement of his left arm caused him excruciating agony. But, still clutching his Central Steel scrip, he staggered in the wake of the crowd. Another trainload was coming along the passageway behind him. The leaders were running wildly, white-faced and panic-stricken. The man in the corner was roughly

jostled, pushed this way and that, sobbing and moaning as he tried to keep going. To reach his brokers before the others! That was all he asked, O God!

Then the main body of the trainload reached him, overtook him, thrust him roughly aside against the wall of the long passage, and he went down with a despairing shriek to rise no more. No one heeded the untidy pile of clothing huddled on the ground, now lying shapeless and silent under their feet.

WHEN Simpson got out of the train, he rapidly made up his mind that it was no use trying to shove a way through the frightened mob, and he stayed where he was for a few minutes. Fortunately he was near the end of the train, so that in a few seconds he was left standing clear of the rapidly emptying platform, alone save for a few railway officials. A hand touched his arm and he turned to find the anxious little man at his elbow.

"Mr. Simpson! Excuse me, please, but what am I to do?"

"We'd better stay here for a bit until the crowd has cleared. They are frightened about something and there'll be a disaster, if panic breaks out. Charing Cross Bridge down! By Jove, it does make one think."

"Mr. Simpson, I'm frightened! I don't mind confessing it."

"You'll be all right if you stay here for a bit."

"I don't mean that. I'm not afraid of that sort of thing. It's my savings. All I've got. They're in Central Steel. What am I to do?"

"I see. You want my advice as a broker. Well, come with me to my office. We'll soon see how matters stand and then you can perhaps give me instructions to sell."

The little man turned a shade paler, if that was possible. Simpson found his heart warming towards this poor scared human being, a decent little man.

"I don't think I can come to your office, Mr. Simpson. I'm overdue at my own office as it is and, if there is going to be trouble, I must be there to watch the firm's interests. I ought to have telephoned early this morning but Mary, that's my wife, said not to worry. But I don't know now. Charing Cross Bridge down! I can't afford to lose . it's too horrible to think of. There's Mary and the children! What am I to do, Mr. Simpson?"

Simpson looked down from his six-foot-one at the little man. "Have you thought what it would mean, if Murgatroyd's statement is true?"

"Yes! It would mean a tremendous crash in the stock market. That's why I must get to the office at once. I—I'm head clerk. They'll look to me for a good deal. Not that I have to take the important decisions. But—my God, do you mean that it is true?"

A sudden feeling of pity for this frightened morsel of humanity swept over Simpson. After all, his firm was buying Central Steel under instructions from the Claudius Syndicate. There could be no harm in buying the little man's holding. "Look here, things are a bit disorganized this morning. You won't be missed for an hour or so. Come along to my office with me. I think I can promise that we'll take your Central Steel off your hands at a reasonable figure. I'm in Blunt, Simpson and Company."

The little man gasped with relief. "I know you, Mr. Simpson, though you don't know me. I hope you don't think, when I spoke to you, that I even meant to suggest. . ."

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE
*F-N TEST?
*The Famous Finger Nail Test
1 "It's F-N, the test for men!" Scratch your head —if you find dryness or loose dandruff you need Wildroot Cream-Oil. Buy the large economy size.
YOUR HAIR CAN LOOK LIKE THIS WITH NEW
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL
2 Keeps hair well combed all day without that greasy look! Grooms without grease! Relieves dryness, removes loose ugly dandruff. Your hair looks good and feels good.
NON-ALCOHOLIC
CONTAINS REFINED
LANOLIN!
3 Refined. LANOLIN is a soothing oil that closely resembles the oil of the human skin. Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or druggist.
WILDROOT
CREAM-OIL
NON-ALCOHOLIC

"Of course not. That's all right. We'll go along together."

"I'm terribly grateful. Do you think the price will have slumped very badly? I shall have to stand a loss, I know. But I can still work and save for a few years and make it up. It would have been too awful to lose it all, if there's a bad panic in a day or two."

Simpson looked down again at his diminutive companion. A decent little chap, he thought once more, occupying a place of some distinction in his own little world. Head clerk! Doubtless invaluable to his firm, a good husband and father, but with his horizon bounded by the immediate interests of the firm and his comfortable suburban home. He and his like were the backbone of the country!

Disaster, to his way of thinking, could only mean one of two things, a panic in the stock market threatening the interests of his firm, or something threatening the stability of his home. He would not visualize the wider aspects of the crash that was coming. Simpson, with his livelier imagination, saw more clearly into the future that is, if Murgatroyd were right.

If he were, this first shiver of alarm that had infected his fellow pasesngers that morning was but a trifling beginning, but significant to anyone who thought out the implications of Murgatroyd's statement to its logical conclusions. Sylvia! A sharp thrill of alarm shook Simpson. He pulled himself up sharply. He mustn't panic like those poor creatures in the train. Better get along to the office and see how things stood.

THEY hurried down the slope toward London Bridge, meaning to take a bus to the city, but it was at once obvious that this was out of the question. The traffic was in a complete jam and nothing seemed to be moving. A few vehicles passed now and again coming from the city, but everything going cityward was in a solid block. Simpson spoke to a perspiring policeman who was vainly trying to disentangle the traffic, and asked what was the matter. The policeman desisted from his hopeless task and took off his helmet, mopping his brow.

"Beats me, sir. I've tried telephoning to the station to find out what's blocking the road. The Tower Bridge is blocked too, and so is Southwark Bridge. No good diverting the traffic round that way. Never seen anything like it. Must be a fire or something holding up everything in the city. Look at the people, too, almost running they are. And in this heat. Phew!"

"Have you heard if it's true that Charing Cross Bridge is down across the Embankment?"

The policeman regarded Simpson with sudden suspicion. "Have you got Murgatroyd on the brain, too? Move along, please. Charing Cross Bridge! Might as well ask if the Tower of London has been washed down the river. Charing Cross Bridge! I ask you! Move along, please."

They decided to walk, but even this was no easy matter. They reached London Bridge without difficulty, but the bridge itself was packed on both pavements with a strangely silent crowd pushing its way across the city. Everyone was staring at the high-piled buildings at the far end of the bridge with a curious intentness. The drivers of most of the jammed vehicles on the bridge had stopped their engines in despair of moving on, and there was a disconcerting silence, broken only by a low murmur of muttering voices and the shuffling footsteps of the throng.

They seemed to feel the presence of something vague and menacing in the air around them and they spoke in an undertone. Simpson and the little man felt the contagion of nervousness and they, too, conversed in a hushed tone as though they were on holy ground. Progress was slow but fairly continuous, and Simpson told the little man that he knew a short cut through the mazy alleyways of the city which would bring them to a side entrance to the office.

"We shall be there in ten minutes with luck. What on earth can be holding up the traffic?"

The little man did not reply. He was staring ahead at the city of London as though fascinated; as though it was the ultimate goal of a lifetime. Suddenly he spoke in a curiously shrill voice.

"Mr. Simpson! Shall we be in time? There'll be others. I hadn't thought of that. All these people! They are going to sell out, too, while there is time. We must hurry! The price will slump. . ."

Those around them looked up at the shrill sound of the little man's voice. The haggard anxiety in their faces sharpened to alarm at his words. A cry arose to hurry up, and there was a press forward. Something of the little man's fear communicated itself to them, but panic did not break out. The alarm spread rapidly, but seemed to dissipate itself after an un-

easy surge and swell. Panic did not break out—not yet.

They reached the end of the bridge in company with the muttering crowd, and Simpson quickly piloted the little man through a series of narrow lanes and alleys to the side entrance to the offices of Blunt, Simpson & Co. in Throgmorton Street. Here and there they had a glimpse of the main streets filled with a mighty crowd and a jam of blocked traffic. The people had the same curious intentness as those on London Bridge. However, there was no disorder.

"At last. Here we are." And Simpson ushered the little man through the side entrance. Handing him over to a clerk with instructions to dispose of his affair as rapidly as possible, Simpson hurried upstairs to the room he shared with Blunt. His partner was staring out of the window. He called to Simpson to come and look.

"Good Lord," he said. "I'm glad you've come. Just look at the crowd! Where have they all come from and what do they think they're doing? I suppose they have been scared by that old fool Murgatroyd and want to sell out whatever they've got. There's an ugly run on the banks too. They're going mad!"

SIMPSON had remained at the window. He threw it open and leaned out. Immediately a sea of white faces was turned up toward him and a roar of voices assailed him. Papers were waved at him and as far as he could make out the ignorant crowd was yelling at him offers to sell securities; yelling in various tones of execration or entreaty. He waved back at them with a gesture of impotence and was rewarded with a howl of frenzy and a threatening rush in his direction. One or two stones were thrown and one crashed through the window amid an exultant yell from without. The crash brought the head clerk hurrying into the room.

"Oh, good gracious me! Good morning, Mr. Simpson. What a sight, what a sight! What do they think they are doing?"

"Ask me another, Chick. I suppose they want to sell their shares and turn them into cash."

"Yes, sir. Everyone is selling at the moment. All sellers and no buyers, except ourselves. I don't like it, sir, and it's about these buying orders that I wish to speak to you. It's not only our own clients. Other firms are coming to us! Am I to go on buying? The price is slumping every minute."

Blunt was still at the telephone urging another attempt to get through to the Claudius Syndicate. He looked up at Chick's words. "We're safe so long as the Claudius people give us enough cover. I'm trying to get them."

"But, sir, is it safe? Oughtn't we to get out? Decline the business! That article of Professor Murgatroyd's coming on top of the Severn Bridge disaster. Do you think it's true? The firm has a big holding in Central Steel. . . ."

He had to shout to make himself heard above the rising clamor of the street. Before either Simpson or Blunt could reply, the telephone bell rang and Blunt grabbed it.

"Is that— Ah, at last. The Claudius Syndicate. Put me through to Mr. Claudius' secretary, please. Blunt speaking. . . Hullo, Blunt speaking. I wish to talk to Mr. Claudius on his private line. That you, Claudius? Blunt, this end. . . Yes, we are still buying Central Steel on behalf of your syndicate It's about that I wanted to speak to you. No need to waste time telling you how matters stand. You know all about that. Am I to go on? . . Very well, but we must have additional cover. The pace is terrific. You're sending a cheque? That is very satisfactory. What is the amount? What!" Blunt nearly dropped the telephone. "Phew! You mean to go on, then. Look here, Claudius, I think you'd better come round here yourself. There'll be merry Hades in the market before long and I think you had better be on the spot . . . You'll bring the cheque around yourself at once? Good! Come to the side entrance; there's a huge crowd blocking the street and you might not be able to get through. Good-by."

Blunt sat down in his chair with a gratified smile. "Well, Chick, you look worried."

"I *am* worried, Mr. Blunt. It's these buying instructions. Our men are buying, while the bottom is falling out of the market."

"Why worry?" said Simpson. "It's not we who are buying, but the Claudius—"

"Sh! Not so loud! You and I and Chick know who is the mysterious buyer, but no one else does."

"The whole of London knows we are buying Central Steel, and it looks as if the whole of London was unloading Central Steel on us."

"Yes, sir, that's what scares me. It's madness!"

"Nonsense, Chick," replied Blunt. "It's business. We get our commission."

"Listen to the row in the street, Mr. Blunt. Look at the crowd! I'm frightened, sir. There's the firm's holding!"

"We can sell."

"But at what price? It's falling hourly. . . . Every minute. The firm can't stand it."

"Chick's right there," Simpson interposed from the window. "We stand or fall with Claudius. Don't worry, Chick. He's given us more cover. What was the figure, Blunt?"

Blunt impressively held up the scribbling pad, on which he had scrawled the amount of the cheque.

"By Jove, I guessed it. He means to corner the steel market."

Chick smiled nervously but still looked worried.

"Perhaps I oughtn't to say it, but do you think Professor Murgatroyd's statement was—er—inspired by Claudius?"

"Shouldn't be surprised. Claudius is clever—damned clever."

"Did he also 'inspire' the Severn Bridge disaster?"

"My dear Simpson!" came in shocked tones from Blunt. "Anyway, there's no denying that it has helped Claudius."

"Yes, but only if he is wrong."

"I don't follow. How do you mean?" Blunt was puzzled.

"I'm just wondering. Suppose Murgatroyd is right."

SIMPSON'S healthy, sun-tanned face went a shade paler. His imagination was of a livelier nature than Blunt's or Chick's, and a growing sense of horror, incredulous horror, began to invade his mind. He was one of the few who foresaw the frightful peril that threatened his country; but like others he shrank from admitting to his mind the full implication of the catastrophe that was sweeping toward them with ever-increasing speed. Before he could resume the conversation, a sudden rise in the clamor without, mingled with shrill cries and screams, brought them all three to the window. Simpson opened it and craned out. "There's something badly wrong over there. Look!"

A frightened clerk burst into the room, forgetful of all the hushed decorum which usually attended entrance into the sanctum of the heads of the firm. "Mr. Chick," he gasped, "one of our men has just got back. He's hurt, bleeding. Can you come?"

Chick immediately responded with a hurried "Excuse me" to the two partners. The clerk was flurried and tremulous.

The door closed behind Chick, and Blunt stared at Simpson in silence. Then they both turned to the window as though the strange happenings in the street fascinated them. They were roused at last from their contemplation by a harsh voice in the room behind them.

"Well, here I am."

"Ah, Claudius! I'm glad you have come."

"Are you rattled?"

"We were a bit, until you phoned."

Claudius stood by the door by which he had entered, a grim, squat figure, rather swarthy and foreign looking, with an intimidating manner and a way of speaking, as though he were repressing a violent fit of rage.

"I had to fight my way to get in here. The fools! They are frightened about something." He sneered. "Frightened men are dangerous—frightened fools are worse."

"Have you brought the cheque?"

"Here!" Claudius strode into the room and sat with a crash in an arm-chair. "Well?"

Blunt took the cheque reverently and pursed his lips over it. "The amount is colossal. It's purely a matter of business, Claudius, but I must refer to the bank."

Claudius scowled. "It's the first time I've had my signature on a cheque questioned," he grated harshly.

Blunt wavered. "The amount is staggering," he protested.

"His signature is good enough for me," said Simpson.

"Oh, well—er—"

"Look here, Blunt, are you going on with me or not? Come on, out with it."

"Of course we are—that is ."

"Of course, Claudius, we are with you!" cried Simpson. "It's common sense. We sink or swim with you."

Claudius barked a short laugh. "That's the sort of talk I like. Well, get on with it."

A renewed uproar from the street interrupted them, and Blunt returned to the window.

"They're going mad outside! And it's pandemonium inside, too. Our men are mobbed the moment they appear on the floor. It's caused by that statement of Murgatroyd's."

"Murgatroyd is an old fool," grated the harsh voice, "but he's playing my game for me."

Claudius lit a cigar with a steady hand. Blunt remained at the window, but Simpson came and sat on the table beside the financier.

"Claudius! What is your game?" he asked quietly. "Hasn't the time come for cards on the table? Who is in the syndicate? We've never known."

Claudius leaned back in his chair chewing his cigar, and regarded Simpson with a sardonic expression. "I am the syndicate. Oh, there are one or two others—you'd be surprised to know who—with a pull that is useful to me, but they don't really count. I am the only . . ."

A stone smashed through the window again, and howls and yells filled the room with their menacing sound.

"They're crazy," shrieked Blunt, backing hastily away from the window. "Keep away!" Yet he still tried to peer out from a safe distance.

"Quick, Claudius, what is your game? We must know, if we are going on with you."

"It's simple enough. You're no fool like Blunt. You've got imagination, while he can't see beyond the end of his nose. Well, we are cornering the world's supply of steel."

"We! Who are 'We'?"

Claudius paused for a moment and revolved his cigar. "Me in England. Van Diemen in America. Rosenbaum in Germany. Count Lichtenst . ."

The door burst open and Chick rushed in, pale and frenzied.

"Sir! Sir! Mr. Claudius! It's a riot! It isn't only Central Street. It's everything! Prices have gone to nothing. Two of our men are here hurt, bleeding Everything is sliding ."

Claudius rose to his feet, a menacing figure, and glowered on the trembling Chick. "Keep your head, you fool, and go on. I buy Central Steel! Do you understand?"

"You can buy it for nothing—nothing, I tell you!" He had to shout to make himself heard above the noise from the street pouring through the shattered windows. "It's a different sort of panic. They're fighting outside. They say Charing Cross Bridge is down across the Embankment! Charing Cross Bridge! And there are other stories. The whole city—"

Claudius strode up to Chick and seized him roughly. "I buy Central Steel," he roared, shaking him from side to side. "I buy Central Steel! Do you hear? God of my fathers! The fools will wreck everything."

"But, sir—"

"Can't you control your men?" snarled the financier savagely. "Don't stand gibbering like that. Get on back to your job."

"But you don't understand. I can't send my men out into that." And he pointed to the window.

Blunt and Simpson involuntarily followed Chick's dramatic gesture, and Claudius with an exclamation of impatient exasperation thrust the head clerk aside so that he fell against a chair, and strode quickly to their side.

"Intimidated by a rabble like that!" he shouted furiously. "You damned fools! Just when my plans have matured, you let me down like this. Simpson! Are you going to rat like the rest?"

"Claudius, suppose Murgatroyd is right. Have you thought of that?"

Something flickered in the financier's swarthy face for a second under Simpson's steady scrutiny. He calmed himself and turned to where Chick was rising dizzily to his feet. "Well, Chick?" he growled in a threatening tone.

But before Chick could reply there was a sudden clamor of voices in the corridor outside. The door was flung open and a crowd of clerks, stenographers and typists burst into the room. Chick was swept aside by the rush of the alarmed and excited staff, but they were checked by the sight of the grim figure of Claudius standing motionless with his back to the table.

Blunt roused himself. "This is madness," he shouted. "Get back to your places!"

"Damned if I do!" shouted a voice, and there was a yell of approval. "Go and do your own dirty work!" another shouted. "It isn't safe anywhere. Charing Cross Bridge is down! Let's get out while there's time!"

Claudius glared at the frightened mob, his thick lips pressed together in grim determination. "Silence, you dogs!" he barked suddenly, during a momentary pause in the rising clamor.

An angry snarl greeted his words, and there was an ugly surge in his direction. But something in the adamantine pose of the grim Claudius daunted them and they hung back, while their angry cries died on their lips. Then Claudius spoke.

"Listen to me, you fools! You cowards, scared by an old idiot of a professor who has told you that iron and steel are rusting away. Oh, yes, try and shout me down if you dare, but I'm telling you the plain truth. You are frightened by a bogey just as if you were children, miserable, snivelling children! You're paid to do your jobs and now you are going to desert your posts, because a number of fools like yourselves

start shouting in the streets. Get back to your work, you curs, or else get out and stay out for good."

THE very violence and fury of his insolent speech beat down the resistance of the crowd, huddled indecisively on one side of the room. One or two of them slunk out, while the others broke into groups murmuring among themselves. Their voices began to rise again. "All very well to talk us down," cried one, "but I say it's murder to send us out. Mr. Blunt, what do you say? You are our chief, not Claudius." Noisy approval greeted this, and a hubbub arose with once more a dangerous and threatening move toward the financier, who stood unmoved, facing them with a sardonic sneer on his swarthy features.

Suddenly Claudius threw up his hand and the unexpected gesture silenced them for a moment. "Look at me! I'll show you something." He strode quickly to the fender and picked up the poker. "Look at this. This poker. Yes, this *iron* poker. Has it rusted away in the night as that lunatic Murgatroyd told you? If he is right, it will snap like a rotten stick when I bend it."

They stared in silence at the squat figure of the man who had dominated them, holding the poker in his powerful grasp.

"Now watch me!"

He tightened his grip on the poker and began to bend it slowly across his knee. Fascinated, they stared at him as though their fate depended on the poker.

There was a loud crack like the breaking of a rotten stick. The watchers drew in their breath with an audible hiss at the sight of Claudius standing there staring incredulously at the two halves of the poker, one in each hand. They were so close to him that they could see that the color of the fracture was greenish-blue.

For a brief moment no one moved. The color ebbed from Claudius' face, leaving it a sallow gray. "My God!" he whispered. "So it is true!"

Then pandemonium broke out. The frightened rabble shrank away from the dazed bewildered man, as frenziedly as they had pressed upon him a few moments ago. They made a rush for the door. "Out! Out!" they screamed. "Get out of this!"—"This is a steel-framed building"—"Get the women out"—"Don't trust the lift"—"Out into the street." Their voices died away, echoing down the corridor, leaving the three men alone.

Blunt's stunned gaze returned to the window. He seemed unable for long to drag his eyes away from the happenings outside. "Good heavens," he cried, "the Terminal building! It's cracked from top to bottom."

The telephone bell shrilled. Simpson started from a deep reverie and answered it. "Blunt, Simpson and Company speaking. . . Yes, he's here. Do you want to speak to him? . . . . Claudius, it's the bank. They want to speak to you urgently."

He held out the telephone, but Claudius did not reply. He was still holding the two pieces of the poker.

"Claudius! It's the bank. You must speak to them."

Claudius turned his head slowly toward Simpson. "The bank. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters now."

"They insist on speaking to you."

"Oh, very well." The financier moved slowly to the table. He seemed to have aged ten years in the last few minutes. He took the receiver wearily. "Claudius speaking. My cheques? They are worthless. . . Yes, quite worthless. . . . Security?" His grim features twisted into a wry smile. "Oh, yes, I can give you security. Twenty million tons of rotten sticks. . . I said, twenty million tons of rotten sticks. Good-by. . I'm saying good-by. . . . Good-by."

He replaced the receiver gently on its stand. Blunt had dragged his attention from the window to listen to the short conversation, and he now broke in upon Claudius in great agitation.

"You didn't mean what you said about your cheques? This cheque! We shan't be able to meet our liabilities! Claudius! Speak, man! Don't stare like that."

Simpson restrained him. "Let him be. I wouldn't worry, if I were you, about a worthless piece of paper."

"But, Claudius, for heaven's sake. We shall be hammered. . . ."

A frightful crash outside interrupted him. Blunt rushed back to his post at the window. He gave one look and then screamed sharply, backing away and holding his hands out as though to ward off something horrible. "The Terminal building! On all those people! Horrible, horrible! Don't look!" He sank sick and fainting, into a chair.

SIMPSON hastened to the mantelpiece, where a carafe of water stood, but Claudius was already there. He was holding the glass in his hand, watching a tablet

dissolve. At the sight of Simpson he spoke.

"Simpson, you're no fool, like Blunt. You're young and strong. Get away somewhere. The Highlands or the Welsh hills." He raised the glass to his lips and drank it at a gulp. "I've often contemplated a sudden end, but not for such a fantastic reason as this. Good-by, Simpson, and don't forget Get away, far away! I can see what is coming—coming—coming."

Simpson rushed to his side and caught him as he fell lifeless to the ground. Bewildered by the brutal suddenness of these tragic happenings, he sat on the floor with the dead financier in his arms, while all the things he ought to do chased each other through his mind like a nightmare. Telephone to the police? Summon a doctor? Inform the relatives? What was the use of all these ordinary actions in face of the calamity which had burst on them?

He was roused by a vibrating shock which ran through the building. Some plaster fell from the ceiling. Alarmed, Simpson sprang to his feet rolling the corpse of Claudius roughly aside. A steel-framed building? That's what the frightened staff were crying as they stampeded for the street! Blunt was stirring dazedly in his chair and Simpson ran to him.

"Can you walk? We must get down the stairs."

"The lift," gasped Blunt.

"Can't trust the lift! The rope might break."

"My God! Yes, I remember. Is it really true?"

"Yes. Come, we must go."

"Yes. Better go home. Tell Chick to close the office. . . ."

Simpson pulled him to his feet and piloted him to the door. Ominous cracks were appearing everywhere and frantic desire to reach the open air seized them as though they were fleeing from an earthquake. They hastened down the stairs and came out into the street, which was obstructed by a mass of rubble from the Terminal building.

Blunt paused for breath. "God, what a smash!" he muttered. "I wonder if the building was insured against this."

"Don't you see, man it's the smash-up of everything? Civilization. The human race. The end of the Iron Age. Cheques, insurance policies, the stock exchange, haven't any meaning any longer."

Blunt stared at him in a bewildered manner, trying to take it in. But he was still too dazed to think coherently.

"I'll go home and think it over."

"Are you all right now? Can you manage for yourself?"

"Quite all right, thank you. What are you going to do? Oh, I forgot, you're going down into Worcestershire for the week-end. Dear me, the street is almost blocked. No chance of a taxi, I'm afraid. But the walk will do me good. Well, I'll see you on Monday as usual, I suppose. I do hope they will have cleared away this mess."

Blunt's voice trailed away, and he disappeared from view. Simpson never saw him again.

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CHAPTER IV

SMASH!

SIMPSON turned away and hastened toward the bank. Since he had taken to going regularly to the Dales at Bradley Parva for the week-end, he had made a practice of garaging his car near the Marble Arch. He thus avoided a tiresome drive through London from his home and was able to get quickly onto the road to Oxford and the Cotswolds. Normally he would have taken the tube to Marble Arch from the bank station, and on leaving the office his mind worked automatically, so that he made his way in the direction of the bank.

Simpson reached one of the entrances to the Bank Station, still feeling bewildered and shaken. He hesitated to descend the steps to the station below, fearing the effect of a breakdown in the tube. As he was hesitating, his doubts were resolved for him by an agitated official, crying that the service was suspended. The official propped a blackboard against the railings and mopped his brow. Simpson happened to be close to him, surrounded by the jostling crowd, and asked what was the matter.

"Gawd knows," was the reply. "There's something badly wrong at the power stations, they say. Headquarters has telephoned orders to suspend the services and to get all the trains emptied as soon as possible. Can't understand it at all. They can't shut down the underground altogether, can they? Stands to reason, they can't."

A swirl of the crowd separated them. Simpson rapidly made up his mind to walk to Marble Arch. It wasn't very far and he found the streets clearer, as soon as he had gone a short way along Cheapside. Relays of urchins could carry his suitcase and with this resolve his spirits rose and the feeling of unreality and bewilderment left him. In High Holborn matters were looking more normal, and a certain amount of traffic was moving. The hopeless jam in the center of the city seemed to be confined to that locality, but it was still impossible to get a taxi or a bus as they were all crammed full. Evening papers with flaring headlines were being snapped up as soon as they were delivered, hot from Fleet Street, by boys on bicycles. People read avidly of tales of disaster from all over the country—read and then hurried off with a curiously fixed expression.

A boy on a bicycle swerved in front of Simpson as he crossed a side street, skidded and came down with a crash. He was not hurt and picked himself up with a rueful grin, lifted his machine to remount, and remained staring at it in astonishment. The front wheel had entirely collapsed and the frame was broken in half. The boy lifted the wrecked machine by the handlebars with a jerk and they too snapped. A stare of foolish astonishment spread over his face.

"Blimey! Not 'arf smashed up, ain't it?"

Simpson hastened his pace as far as possible. The horrible fear assailed him that his car would be affected by the greenish-blue corrosion, and he would be unable to reach Sylvia before the full blast of the storm burst upon them. For he was convinced that this would happen very soon. In a few days, movement by any means other than those of the Stone Age would be impossible. His hope lay in the apparently irregular way in which the corrosion was attacking metals. Perhaps it had something to do with the exact quality of the steel, or perhaps the date, recent or remote, of its manufacture affected the rate of disintegration.

There was not a simultaneous breakdown of all steel structures and machines, as might have been expected, but they were falling one by one. Simpson prayed that his car might still be unaffected, and this hope was fortified by the sight of motor vehicles in Oxford Street still apparently as numerous as ever. But with a sinking heart he noted the large number of cars abandoned by the roadside, and he feared that this was due, not to the voluntary abandonment of the cars by their drivers owing to traffic congestion, but to the fact that they had broken down.

Close to Oxford Circus he ran into a dense crowd again. There was something badly wrong, as there were repeated surges to and fro in the mob and fighting appeared to be in progress. Police were trying to keep order, but they were hopelessly outnumbered. A dazed constable with a wound in his head was seated on a doorstep, being tended by an ambulance man, and Simpson found himself temporarily jammed by the mob alongside him. He spoke to the policeman and asked him what was up.

"It's these newspapers, sir, that's what has done it. They're going mad about this corrosion stunt."

"But what has happened?"

"The men working on this new big block

of flats have come out. They say it isn't safe to go on, with the steel rotting away under them as they work. The contractors tried to engage blackleg labor, but the men started shouting that it was murder to send men to work. The contractors tried to force the new men in, but the old hands wouldn't allow them to go in. They began hustling and then fighting. I don't know what has come over people. It's the weather or something; they're scared by these newspaper articles too. The Home Office ought to suppress them, I reckon. I wish you good luck, sir."

Simpson shook hands with him and they parted.

THE crowd was clearing and Simpson was able to cross Oxford Circus. But he soon found it hopeless to get any further along Oxford Street. The big shops were besieged by masses of shoppers intent on laying in stocks of everything, particularly food. People were beginning to realize in increasing numbers that there would be an interruption or even a complete breakdown of transport, and they grasped that this would prevent the shops from getting their supplies regularly.

They thought it better to lay in stocks to tide over the period until things became normal. No panic—not yet; but only large numbers of prudent householders taking precautions. But this was enough to congest Oxford Street from Oxford Circus to Orchard Street, so Simpson quickly decided to go along Upper Regent Street and turn down Wigmore Street. As he hurried along with the panting urchin shouldering his suitcase, an untidy procession came pushing its way through the crowded streets, chanting a dismal hymn and bearing banners with gloomy texts written on them.

REPENT YE
FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND. PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD. SINNERS SHALL BE CAST INTO HELL. THE END OF THE WORLD HAS COME.

A considerable number of people joined the procession, which was on its way to Hyde Park. Ecstasy, alarm, cunning, fear, all manner of emotions were visible on the faces of the throng which joined noisily in the cacophony of the dreary chants. There was a notable absence of ridicule and jeering from the bystanders, many of whom stared for a short time, and then hurried off with that curiously intent look, that Simpson had already noted in so many faces. An intent look betokening a growing realization.

Wigmore Street was reasonably clear, and Simpson felt relieved now that he was quite near to his garage. If only the car was running all right! It would not take him long to get clear of London and then he could speed to the side of the girl he loved, and who, he hoped, loved him. What a relief to get right away from the tense atmosphere of the town to the sane quietude of the rectory at Bradley Parvo. Simpson wondered what the Reverend Sylvanus Dale would make of all these strange happenings, and something of the peace of the countryside entered into his soul at the mere contemplation of the clean, healthy atmosphere of the rectory.

But it was not going to be so easy to get away after all. Simpson arrived at his garage to find a harassed proprietor besieged by car owners, indignant, bullying, plaintive, beseeching, but all demanding instant attention to their cars before anyone else. Simpson went to his car and started up the engine, which to his delight roared into immediate life. He had a fair supply of petrol in his tank, and he was ready to start. But he was jammed by many other cars in the open garage, and the perspiring garage hands could not succeed in clearing a gangway for him, however hard they tried. The proprietor snatched a few moments to speak to Simpson.

"I can't make it out. Everyone's car seems to have gone wrong overnight! Well, not everyone's, but a surprising number. There's the usual week-end rush, though I could cope with that by itself. But this scare about corrosion has sent people scuttling to the country and I don't blame them. That's the place to be in, until things settle down. It's going to be hell soon. Wish I could get away, but it's my own garage and I can't leave it. In a way, this corrosion is good for trade, but at present I'm simply overwhelmed; and I shall lose a lot of customers who are dissatisfied at the delay this morning. Excuse me, sir," and he hurried off.

It was two hours before Simpson was able to start. One by one the refractory cars were coaxed into action or were pushed aside for repairs. The car in front of Simpson's was occupied by a cursing driver, who kept shouting impatiently to clear the gangway as his car, like Simpson's appeared to be in good order. At last the way was cleared. The impatient driver

revved his engine up, preparatory to moving off, when there came a nasty grinding sound from the crankcase and his engine stopped abruptly.

"Hell and damnation!" yelled the driver, frenziedly trying the self-starter and twiddling the controls in vain. "Hi!" he shouted to the proprietor, who happened to be passing. "Get your men at once!"

"Sorry, sir, but my men are already snowed under. I can't possibly attend to your car. Put it in neutral, please, and help me to push it to one side."

"Damned if I do! I simply must get off. It's most important. Get your men at once."

"I'm sorry, but I can't do impossibilities. It's this greenish-blue corrosion. Everyone's car is breaking down."

"Greenish-blue grandmother!" bawled the driver rudely. "Here, bring your men along, I'll make it worth your while—and theirs, too. If you don't I'll take my car away from your garage." He appealed to Simpson for support, alternatively cursing, threatening, imploring and offering bribes. He was an unpleasant person, but so obviously agitated that Simpson took pity on him and offered a lift.

"WHAT way are you going?" the unpleasant person barked, with a sudden attempt at civility.

"Through Oxford."

"Well, that's lucky. I'm going to High Wycombe."

"Jump in then. I only hope my car will hold out."

"Much obliged, I'm sure. It's shocking mismanagement, and I shall have something to say when I get back. If I ran my business as badly ."

But Simpson was not listening, as he was occupied in steering a tortuous way out of the garage. Clear at last, he drove into the Bayswater Road and made good progress. There seemed to be nothing unusual along this highly respectable thoroughfare, except that at one place near Lancaster Gate a stretch of the railings of Hyde Park had fallen over onto the pavement. An idle crowd gaped at them, while a policeman and two official-looking persons were surveying the fractures and making notes in a book.

"More mismanagement," grumbled Simpson's companion. "I suppose they blame it on this corrosion nonsense, instead of their own demand carlessness."

"I shouldn't be surprised," ventured Simpson mildly.

"Huh! Surely you don't believe in all this moonshine."

"Well, there was the Severn Bridge and Charing Cross."

"Gross incompetence in both cases. The engineers ought to be prosecuted."

"I saw the Terminal building crash with my own eyes this morning."

"Eh? What's that? The Terminal building? In Throgmorton Street? Gawd! You don't mean it!"

Simpson assured him of the truth of his statement.

"Steel-framed building, eh? Well, it does make you think, doesn't it?" The unpleasant man ruminated in silence for a few moments, but the process of thinking was evidently too much for him. "Anyway, it won't affect my business," he concluded with satisfaction.

Simpson inquired as to the nature of his business.

"Furniture dealer. All these new houses going up everywhere," he explained. He was growing more amiable as they progressed, and his ill-temper at the garage receded into the past. "Hundreds and hundreds, I might say thousands and thousands, of little new houses going up, and every one of them wanting three or four beds, dining room suite, drawing-room sofa and arm-chair. . . ." He grew almost lyrical, describing the contents of each little house. "It's a dead cert. The market is there and you can't miss it, if you get in at the right time. Half the furniture in England is made at High Wycombe, and I'm fixing up a most important contract with . . I say, you're not in the trade yourself, I suppose," he broke off abruptly in alarm.

Simpson hastened to reassure him.

They had run easily down Notting Hill and over the railway bridge at Shepherd's Bush. Here there was a huge mob blocking the road. An overturned tramcar was lying on its side, and, mounted upon it, a perspiring orator was addressing the crowd.

Policemen were trying to reach him, but a strong body of supporters were resisting the police, who were completely outnumbered. As Simpson's car ran down the slope from the railway bridge, the crowd suddenly swept across the road, completely blocking it. The furniture dealer broke out into impotent curses, but they were jammed in a hopeless block and, worse still, surrounded by a hostile mob. Banners were being displayed with inflammatory devices on them.

150 WORKERS MURDERED
AT THE SEVERN BRIDGE

52 WORKERS MASSACRED
AT CHARING CROSS

were inscribed on the banners and waved defiantly. But a more sinister note was sounded by large numbers of placards and banners bearing the words:

HELP YOURSELVES!

Simpson and his fellow traveler were within earshot of the mob-leader on the overtuned tramcar, and the burden of his oration seemed to be that the damned capitalists had invented another way of murdering and enslaving the workers by means of greenish-blue corrosion. Transport was being closed down and men were being laid off. Soon there would be nothing in the shops, so go and help yourselves, comrades, while there was time, and checkmate the millionaires, who were trying to make sure of getting supplies for themselves, while the workers starved. It was all very crude, but Simpson noted with alarm that the people were listening intently and making no attempt to help the police.

SIMPSON tried to turn the car but found that it was hopeless. The only result was to attract the attenion of a rough group of hooligans who pushed their way threateningly toward him.

"Come out of it, you dirty capitalists," bawled a rough voice. "Get out, or we'll turn your damned car over. Get out!"

The reply was a volley of oaths from the furniture dealer, who did not lack pluck, however unpleasant his manners might be. The hooligans were taken aback for a moment, but then they surged round the front of the car, shouting down the fluent efforts of Simpson's passenger and drowning his words in torrents of filth. Simpson tried to shut him up, but the furniture dealer, alarmed at the delay, fearing the loss of his contract, and infuriated at the abuse of the toughs, put his head out of the window and raved at them.

"Turn the car over!" a man yelled, and his companions needed no second bidding. Half a dozen of them seized the front of the car, which rocked ominously. They lifted the front wheels clear of the ground and made clumsy attempts to overturn it, but they only succeeded in staggering to one side with it, so that it faced the way they had come. The car was a heavy one, and the toughs found that they had tackled more than they could cope with.

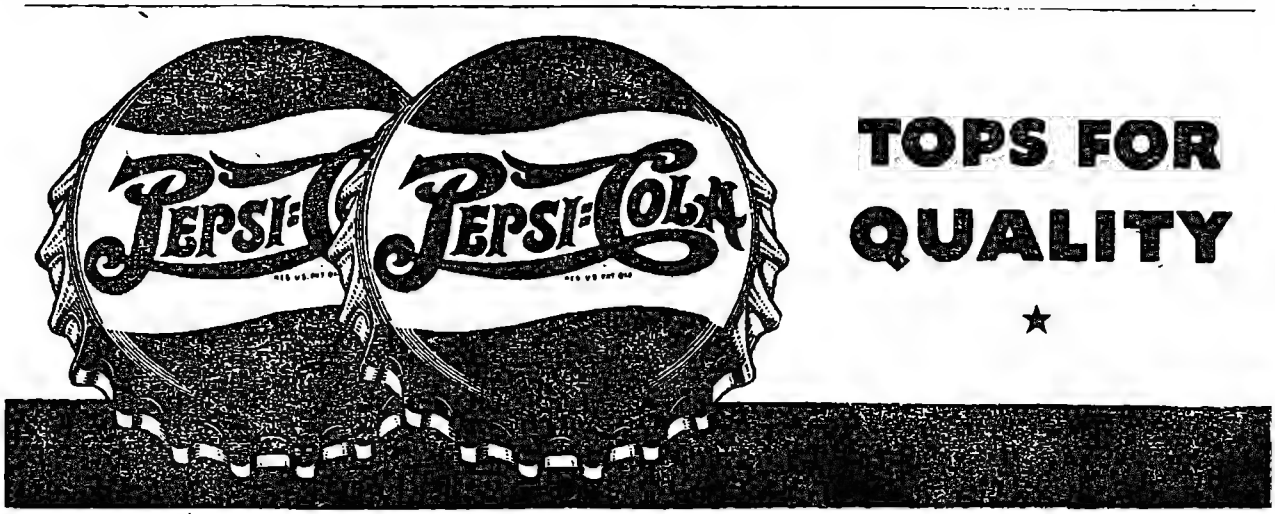
Finding themselves baffled in their intentions of turning over Simpson's car, they suddenly turned their attentions with complete unreason to a very small car. This was easy prey and, amid loud cheers, the car was overturned, the alarmed occupants scrambling out with some difficulty. The toughs merely hustled them and the matter would have got no worse, had not one of the unfortunate passengers showed fight. He and his fellow passenger, a young girl, were immediately rushed and knocked down, the girl screaming with terror. Simpson opened the door to get out and go to the rescue, but the furniture dealer held him back.

"Don't be a fool!" he cried.

"Let me go! Let go, damn you! Can't you see they're trampling that girl under foot?"

"You can't do anything. Drive on while there's a chance! Those brutes have turned our head the right way. Get her going!"

Simpson struggled furiously, but he was cramped behind the steering wheel. There



came a quick change in the situation. The road suddenly cleared and the mob fled violently back the way it had come. "Soldiers!" bawled someone, and the violent element of the crowd retreated, sweeping the bewildered people along with them. Simpson found a clear space in front of him.

"Get a move on!" yelled the furniture dealer. "Those poor beggars will be looked after by the soldiers."

Simpson hesitated. It seemed a callous thing to do to leave that overturned car and the two figures lying huddled at the side of it; but the furniture dealer was insistent, and it was undeniable common sense to go while the going was good. Sylvia needed his help, every bit as much as that poor girl lying crushed in the roadway. The silvery tinkle of an ambulance decided him, and he started the engine.

"Go back a few hundred yards," said the furniture dealer. "I know a way round to Western Avenue, and we can get clear that way."

Piloted by the furniture dealer, Simpson threaded his way through side streets, and presently they emerged into a road with tram-lines, though there were no trams running. Some of the standards holding the overhead conductor wires had toppled over, partially blocking the road.

"Must have been knocked over by a lorry or something," said the furniture dealer.

"Or corroded through by a greenish-blue substance," muttered Simpson.

AS THEY topped the rise at Park Royal, a furious conflagration somewhere near Neasden could be seen. Columns of smoke rose into the still air, but the yellow haze prevented them from seeing exactly where the fire was. Simpson was familiar with the view from this point, and he thought it was the big power station that was ablaze. They had to stop at the next cross-roads to let fire engines go roaring past down the hill. One engine was standing there broken down, and they slowed to ask the firemen where the fire was.

"At the power station. A turbine burst and wrecked the station, starting a big fire. Our engine has burst, too. If it's this greenish-blue corrosion, there's no knowing what will happen next. I don't like it at all."

Simpson thanked him and went on. The furniture dealer twisted uneasily in his seat and then burst out, "Is the whole world going mad, or am I? Everyone is talking about this blasted corrosion. Well, anyway, houses don't corrode, nor does furniture. I shan't be affected, even if there is some truth in all this talk."

Simpson remained silent. The obtuseness of the ordinary man in the face of this cataclysm appalled him. Everyone simply judged the matter in the light of his immediate outlook and failed to see the awful consequences of the universal failure of iron and steel.

"I wish you'd say something," said his passenger in an aggrieved voice. "You don't answer when I speak to you. I said my business won't be affected. That's all right, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, but there is such a lot to think about. You won't be affected? Well, I don't know. How will you get your furniture delivered?"

"By rail of course, as usual."

"Railways use a lot of steel. Rails, bridges, engines, trucks—they're all steel, you know. They might prove to be unreliable."

"Well, I can hire lorries. What are you getting at?"

"The lorries will break down."

"You're evidently not a business man," the furniture dealer snorted. "I should let a contract for delivery with a stiff penalty clause in case of failure."

Simpson sighed and relapsed into silence. It seemed impossible to bring home to anyone the utter breakdown of normal life that was impending. The utter dependence of the civilized man on iron and steel, which was so clear to him, did not seem to be discerned by any but a few gifted with a little imagination. Claudius had committed suicide rather than face that which was to come; but men like this fellow passenger still spoke and thought in terms of contracts, dividends, stocks and shares-terms which to Simpson's clear mind had already ceased to have any meaning.

To Simpson's relief the car continued to run with no sign of distress. Thanking his stars for this, he sped along at a good pace which satisfied even the furniture dealer, who had grumbled once or twice at their slow progress. At Greenford they swung left to get on to the main Uxbridge Road, which they reached near Hanwell. Here there was more trouble where the Great Western Railway main line crosses the Uxbridge Road by means of a large girder bridge. Traffic on the road was being diverted, and a barrier had been placed across the road by the police. On the railway line above, traveling cranes were at

work, though they could not see what they were doing. One of the girders looked lopsided, and something was seriously wrong with it. Fortunately their route toward High Wycombe and Oxford did not pass under the bridge, and Simpson, already alarmed at the delay they had experienced, did not want to ask what the trouble was. They soon reached Southall, where things looked quite normal, although no trams were running.

"Thank heaven, we're out of London," exclaimed the furniture dealer. "We can get along better now. High Wycombe in half an hour, eh?"

"If all goes well. Do you realize that the Great Western main line is blocked? You won't be able to dispatch your furniture by rail."

"They'll soon have it right again. Anyway there's another route to High Wycombe from Marylebone."

Their steady progress induced a feeling of good humor in the man of business. He asked where Simpson was going.

"Bradley Parva in Worcestershire."

"Never heard of it."

"No, it's a tiny place. I have some friends there, Sylvanus Dale, the rector, charming people. I'm staying the weekend. 'In fact, I rather think of staying in the village some time, on account of this corrosion trouble.'

"Can't say life in a little village attracts me much. Give me town every time, especially if there is going to be any trouble; though it will blow over, you'll see."

"I hope you are right. But supposing it doesn't blow over, don't you think that life in town will become rather difficult? Imagine all the normal services suspended —electric light, gas, water, drainage, posts, telegraphs and telephones, tubes, buses, taxis. ."

"Here, I say, hold on! You're a bit of an optimist, aren't you? All those things can't go wrong together."

"Why not? If iron and steel fail, everything in our mechanized life fails too. Can't you see that?"

"Yes, but look here, you've been reading what that woolly-brained old professor has been saying."

"Woolly-brained? I happen to know Professor Murgatroyd. He is a great friend of the Dales, whom I am going to stay with. I have met him there once or twice. He is the sanest man I know. He would not indulge in idle scaremongering. He has tried to warn the world of a terrible danger. I believe in his warning. You do not."

"I think he exaggerates, that's all. I won't deny there will be a bit of trouble perhaps. We've seen a bit of it today, but here we are bowling along as right as rain. I shall have my contract signed by the evening and you will stay with your friends. That doesn't look like a bust-up all round. The government will soon have things in hand, just like they did in the general strike. People got panicky then and did silly things—ran away to the country, because they were afraid of what might happen in the town." The furniture dealer snorted unpleasantly.

SIMPSON sighed again. It was hopeless to try and bring convinction to such an unimaginative soul as his fellow passenger, and he gave up the attempt. They passed through Uxbridge, where the street was blocked with tramcars, which had been run to the terminus and left there when the service was suspended.

After Uxbridge they felt they really were out of London and away into the country. Simpson's spirits rose; it was a lovely day and only the persistent yellow fog marred the beauty of the undulating land. Visibility beyond a mile or so was impossible, but the yellow color gave a mellow glow to the sunlight as though it were evening time. Yet, in spite of the beauty, there was something sinister about this fog which had depressed everyone's spirits for the last month or two. The furniture dealer, however, sheltered in his protective armor of unimaginativeness, felt none of these things; he began to explain with satisfaction at their near approach to High Wycombe. As they ran through Gerrard's Cross he took out a sheaf of papers and a pencil and started to jot down memoranda for his forthcoming interview with the manufacturer. The point of his pencil broke when the car bumped slightly over an obstruction.

"Damn!" he grunted, and groped in his pocket for his penknife. He secured it and opened the blade, with which he began to sharpen the broken pencil. The blade broke off short.

"Here! Just look at that. Broken off short. Funny thing, breaking like that. I've had this knife for years."

"What is the color of the fracture?"

"Color? Why, what do you mean? Gawd! Here, half a mo'. Drive slow for a bit. . . . It ain't shiny like it ought to be. It's all dull and—by gum, it is greenish-blue. . . . I say, I mean, wait a moment, I'll try the other blade. . . . God!"

He sat dumb with astonishment and growing consternation. It dawned upon him at last.

"What about the nails and screws in my furniture? Can't have chairs and tables falling to pieces. Customers would complain. I'll have to have a clause in the contract. ."

"If you were a manufacturer, would you sign an agreement containing such a clause?"

"Well—er—no, I suppose I wouldn't."

"Do you still want to go on to High Wycombe?"

"Of course I do. I simply must get that contract through. There's a lot depends on it. I'll have to leave out that clause, I suppose. I've got it! The furniture can be pegged together with wooden pegs, like it used to be in the old days."

"Think it over a bit longer. Your manufacturer is dependent on machinery, you know. He may be unable to complete your contract."

"That's his look-out. The penalty clause would come into operation."

"I rather fancy that the court, if there were any court left to adjudicate your case, would find that greenish-blue corrosion was an act of God. Your penalty clause won't help you. They never are much use, you know."

"What do you mean—if there were any court left? You're a rum sort of bloke! I don't understand half of what you say. But, by gum, it does look as if this greenish-blue corrosion is going to interfere with business a bit."

Interfere with business! Simpson reflected grimly that that was about as far as most people got in trying to think out the consequences of greenish-blue corrosion. But the furniture dealer was not quite so obtuse as he appeared. After a silence he blurted out:

"Yes, I see what you've been getting at. You mean there may be a general bust-up of everything, if this corrosion goes on. But there's usually a way out. For instance," he chuckled, "it so happens that I have another penknife, to say nothing of another pencil, in my case here."

He pulled the case onto his knee and took out the bunch of keys from his trouser pocket. He inserted the key in the lock and it broke at once. The dealer took one look at the fracture and turned a ghastly white. Suddenly he seized Simpson's arm and shrieked, "Stop! Stop!"

"Let go, you fool, you nearly had us into that tree!"

"The car! It isn't safe! It'll crash like—oh, my God! Stop!"

"Sit still Do you think I don't know the risk? That I haven't known it ever since we left London? There's a chance we may get through, and I'm going to take it. You have a better chance than I have—you're only going to High Wycombe, I've got to get to Bradley Parva."

"I don't want to die! Let me get out! I'll walk. It's only five miles now to High Wycombe. I can get there in time. God! I'd forgotten . . . my papers, they're locked in my case. I must get a knife and slash it open. Knife! What the hell is the use of knives? They'll all break in my hand!"

He subsided into muttered curses, staring straight ahead with terrified glassy eyes. Yet even in his abject state there was something heroic about him. His mind was still fixed on getting the contract signed that evening, and he was quite capable of tramping the remaining miles into High Wycombe, carrying his attaché case. Business as usual!

Simpson's anger subsided. They were running into Beaconsfield and he slowed down.

"I'll drop you here, if you like," he said.

Without a word of thanks to Simpson, the other man seized his case and started walking along the road. His face had set in that same intent expression that Simpson had already noticed on the faces of so many of the London crowd, and he hurried along with a curious undeviating stride.

Simpson had once seen a mad dog, and he was strangely reminded of the wretched animal's dreadful hang-dog gait, as it pattered on its course without looking to right or left.

He shivered in spite of the warmth of the day and drove on.

HIGH WYCOMBE. The car purred steadily along the lovely little valley, marred by a ribbon development following the stream rather than the road. Nothing much seemed to be amiss at first. There were knots of people here and there at the corners and quite a crowd outside the big garage of the local bus company. They were quiet and orderly folk, and a number of women with perambulators hovered on the outskirts of the crowd. Simpson did not stop to inquire what had happened, but he noticed that there were no buses on the road.

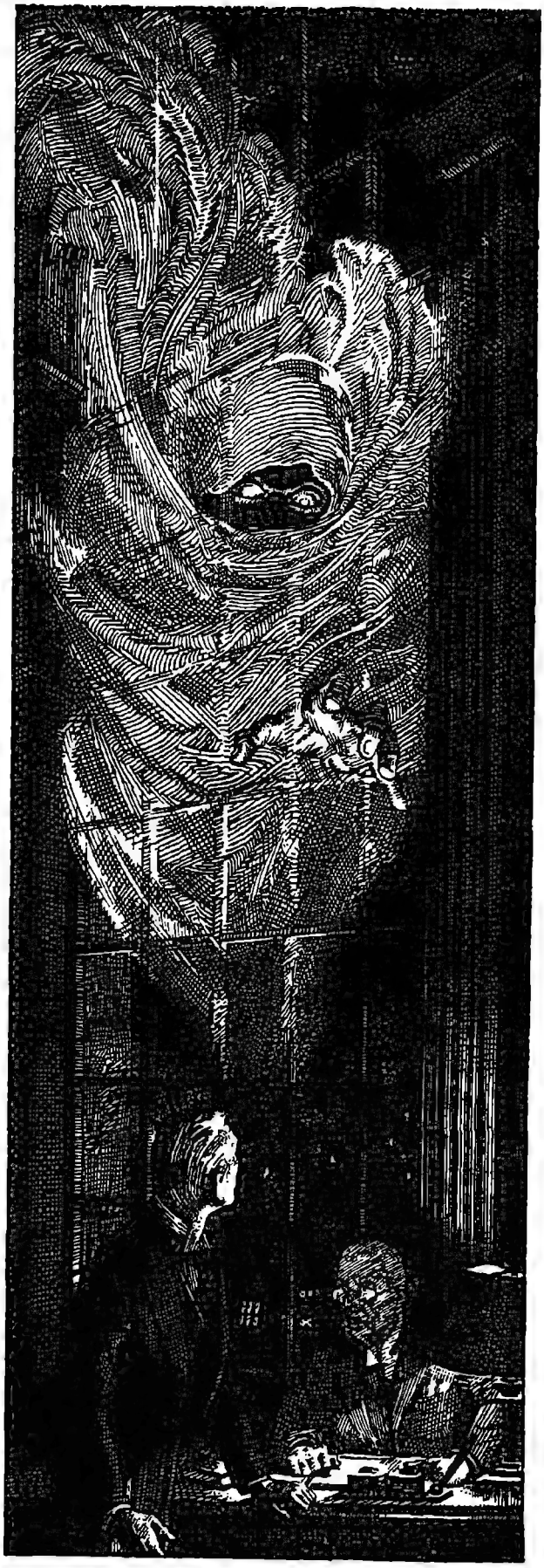
In the High Street things looked more ugly. It was market day, but the stalls

were deserted and empty. One stall lay on its side, a smouldering ruin. The bystanders were being kept on the move by the police, but there was a feeling of tension among them. The traffic signals at the corner near the town hall were not working, but a policeman was on duty, and Simpson was at the head of the traffic queue when the constable held them up. Simpson asked him what had happened, and he replied that a gang of toughs had rushed and looted the market stalls.

"Not Wycombe men. They arrived by bus this morning from London."

The traffic moved on and Simpson was left to digest this scrap of information. A gang of toughs from London. Forerunners of the mobs which would presently break loose from all the great towns, when the horrid specters of scarcity and want stalked among them. The church clock pointed to half past five and Simpson became aware that he was tired and hungry; but he did not dare to stop while Bradley Parva was still so far away. He remembered with a feeling of apprehension that it was not so very far from Birmingham and Coventry. Gangs of toughs from those towns might invade the peace of the countryside in frantic search for food any day now. Sylvia at the mercy of town-bred hooligans! Old Sylvanus Dale would do what he could, but this was a job for someone young and strong. Young and strong! That was what Claudius had called him. "You're young and strong! Get right away into the Highlands or Wales." That was what he had said. The doomed financier had foreseen with the clear vision of a dying man what was coming. "I can see what is coming." His dying words! He had chosen death rather than face what was coming! Simpson shivered again, driving and steering mechanically.

There were no buses anywhere, and here and there people hailed him asking for a lift. Simpson hardened his heart against these demands. He must get on! The car was still running splendidly, and mile after mile was laid behind him along the broad smooth Oxford road. But there had been many delays and it was seven o'clock before he reached Oxford. The city was quiet and all the shops were closed; the usual week-end sightseers were absent and there was hardly a car outside the Mitre. On a sudden impulse Simpson drew up and decided to have something to eat. He was desperately tired, having missed his lunch and tea. The nerve-racking events of the morning had tried him hard and he was



'This confounded fog—it's on my nerves!"

now feeling absolutely exhausted. He swallowed a hasty meal and felt all the better for it.

The waiter seemed to be quite unperturbed by the march of events. There was no lack of good food and the waiter smiled kindly when Simpson asked him if there had been any trouble.

"Not in Oxford, sir," he said, in accents of mild reproach. "Things don't change much in Oxford. And not one of the college buildings is a steel-framed structure," he added with gentle humor. "Not what you would call modern buildings, sir. No, sir, there's been no trouble at all. Thank you, sir."

Simpson was left with the feeling that there never had been, and never would be, any trouble at all in Oxford. The benign old waiter handed him his hat, wishing him a pleasant journey, and something of his gentle, sunny nature communicated itself to Simpson's troubled mind. The good food and the old waiter had done him good, and he resumed his way in better spirits. Sharp right at Carfax, where the traffic signals were cheerfully winking, and soon he was clear of Oxford, bowling along toward the distant Cotswolds.

Night fell and he switched on his lights, noting with satisfaction that they glowed as brightly as usual. The roads were nearly empty, unusually so for a fine Saturday evening, but this circumstance enabled him to hum steadily along at a good pace. His spirits rose as he neared his destination. Only about thirty miles now, and the car was purring happily. He wondered if Dale would have heard from Murgatroyd. The two men were close friends, and it was likely that they would turn to one another in troublesome time for mutual help.

Surely Professor Murgatroyd would have some plan for combatting this dreadful catastrophe! Old Dale could face it with equanimity, as he had made a hobby of living on the land. He farmed the Glebe Farm himself with energy and he would be in no danger of food shortage. He hardly ever bought anything to eat except occasional luxuries for Sylvia. No, he would be all right . . unless a gang of toughs from Birmingham invaded them. But Sylvanus Dale was no weakling, and he would organize resistance in spite of his cloth. His men adored him, and any hostile mobs would get a warm reception from the villagers of Bradley Parva.

The car breasted the rise to the summit of the Cotswolds. To Simpson's watchful ears it was beating as steadily as ever, but he fancied that it did not pull up the steepest part of the hill as sturdily as usual. Only twenty miles now, he thought with relief. Practically there! He drew a deep breath of satisfaction; soon he would be nosing his car through the gate of the rectory and would draw up at the door, where Sylvia would be standing to welcome him.

He always gave a cheerful toot as he entered the drive, and Sylvia always ran to the door to meet him. He wondered if they would be anxious at the lateness of his arrival. It would be past ten before he got there, but they would be sitting up for him and Sylvia would make him a cup of fresh coffee, served deliciously with cream.

He sniffed the aroma in anticipation and smiled in pleasant contemplation of his arrival.

THE car still purred contentedly as they neared the steep descent to Broadway. He wondered idly if there would be any other guests for the week-end. Perhaps Murgatroyd would be there, as he had been once or twice before, in company with that Scottish friend of his; what was his name? Yes, Jamieson. Murgatroyd was a frequent visitor at the rectory and might well be seeking a respite there during this troublous period. Then there was that pale dark fellow, Thompson, who often rode over from Birmingham on Sundays on his motor bicycle, whenever he was doing a turn of duty in Murgatroyd's laboratory in that town. Young Thompson! Simpson frowned quickly at the thought of him. A penniless chemist! Surely Sylvia . . . Simpson broke off his train of thought with a rueful laugh. Yes, confound him, the fellow was attractive in a curious sort of way with his shock of black hair, his deep-set eyes and his pale complexion. A decent chap too, Simpson admitted, but a puny little chap at best.

No good in a scrap!

His thoughts returned with a jerk to the horrid reality of the present. No good in a scrap! No good to Sylvia in a world sliding back to the Stone Age. A girl would need someone big and strong to stand by her, and Simpson contemplated his six-foot-one of solid bone and muscle with complacent satisfaction. Fellows like young Thompson would not attract a girl in these times. Surely not.

IT WAS when the car was rounding the sharp turn just above Broadway that the engine began to make an unpleasant noise. Simpson slipped the clutch out, so that the car glided noiselessly down the steep grade with the engine idling. The unpleasant noise stopepd and he breathed a prayer that all might be well. Broadway was fast asleep as the car ran quietly down the village street past the Lygon Arms. Then the grade flattened out and he accelerated, letting in the clutch. There was immediately a most alarming clatter and he hurriedly let out the clutch and stopped by the roadside.

Inspection revealed nothing and the engine seemed to be ticking over quite normally. He hoped all was well as he climbed back into the driving seat. Too bad to break down, now that he was nearly there. It could only be about fifteen miles to Bradley Parva.

He started up gingerly, but his heart sank. There was something badly wrong; the engine complained grievously, but in desperation he changed up into second and then into top gear, hoping against hope that the failing car could be kept going for the remaining fifteen miles. But it was not to be; he had hardly reached the railway bridge when, with a grinding jar, the car shook violently and came to a stop. There was an ominous cracking sound as he braked and drew up at the side of the road, and he realized with a sinking feeling that he was stranded. Only fifteen miles to go, and no hope of getting there that night.

Unless the Lygon Arms could come to the rescue! It was only about a mile back there and Simpson hurried along, leaving his suitcase in the useless car. There was a light burning and the night porter was sympathetic, but not encouraging. No, sir, they were full up, absolutely full. Could not possibly take anyone else in. Manager's strict orders. Surprising, the number of cars that had broken down. The garage was choked. No, sir, nothing could be hired. Anything that would still go, had already gone.

Simpson tried at two garages and another hotel, but met with a similar reception. The kindly Cotswold folk were willing to do what they could to help, but there was nothing they could do. The idea grew in Simpson's mind that he would have to walk. Fifteen miles! He no longer thought of *only* fifteen miles, but pictured the long miles stretched out in front of him as an immense barrier between him and the girl he loved. He could hardly arrive there before morning. And what of his suitcase? Athletic though he was, he shrank from carrying it so far.

He wasted no further time in search of a car to hire, but set out along the Evesham road. He reached his abandoned car and took out of his suitcase a few necessaries, which he made up into a bundle. He had a walking-sticking and he shouldered his bundle with its help almost gaily. Fifteen miles! It was a long way but not an impossible distance. It would take him five hours at least, without reckoning stoppages for rest and food. He was glad now of that meal at Oxford, though he was already beginning to feel hungry again. Food? He ought to have got some sandwiches at the Lygon Arms. But he couldn't go back there now. He had already tramped three miles fruitlessly, going back to the inn and hunting round for a car. Miles were becoming important considerations!

Evesham was like a city of the dead when he reached it. But after much knocking at an inn, he succeeded in getting a loaf of bread and some cheese from a grumbling and sleepy proprietor. After Evesham his way lay along less frequented roads. He left the main road and plunged into a maze of by-roads, with which he was quite familiar when driving a car. But the roads did not look the same from a pedestrian's point of view. The night was dark and moonless, and the prevailing yellow fog obscured the stars. The absence of the cheery glow of the headlights confused him, and it was not long before he began to feel doubts about being on the right road. There were no wayfarers on the roads at this time of night, and at an unfamiliar cross-road he hesitated. There was a signpost, but the names on it conveyed nothing to him when examined by the light of a match. Worcester 27 miles, pointing in an unexpected direction, added to his uncertainty.

Dawn found him, weary and hungry, walking straight ahead, without looking to right or left, with a curiously intent expression on his countenance.

Keep your eye on the Infantry.... The doughboy does it!

CHAPTER V

PROFESSOR MURGATROYD'S PLAN

THE little village of Bradley Parva, buried in the heart of Worcestershire, basked sleepily in the broiling August sun. The single street straggled comfortably along the bank of the River Severn, and terminated at a rippling ford, used now only for the sleek cattle which grazed luxuriously in the deep meadows of the ancient marsh lands. In bygone days the sturdy Romans, pushing their legions ever further into the unexplored regions of West Britain, had halted hereabouts in a perfect defensive position. In due course a trading establishment grew up and a thriving little town arose.

In later years the little town became lost in the lush lowlands, but in the twelfth century a fat prelate seeking refuge from the stress and worry of life founded at Bradley Parva a monastery, which waxed in wealth and acquired the best lands in the neighborhood. The village prospered greatly for a time, but in the sixteenth century the monastery fell into decay. Later, by some freak of the law, the monastery lands became attached to the living, and the income from them became the property of the incumbent of the rectory.

The opening years of the twentieth century found Bradley Parva, and its once rich levels, falling rapidly into a decline. At this period, however, the Reverend Sylvanus Dale was appointed to the vacant rectory and a new era began for the forgotten village. Sylvanus Dale had inherited a fair fortune, but he had no taste for the fleshpots. After a brilliant career at Oxford, he took holy orders with strong views about restoring vigor to the Established Church. He was no ascetic and would inevigh against the uselessness of trying to instil spiritual comfort into starved bodies.

He found that, in view of the peculiar conditions attached to the living, he was the spiritual and temporal leader of the tiny population struggling to maintain itself against the competition of foreign and dominion produce with ever diminishing strength. Dale threw himself into the fray with tremendous energy. He drained the marshes, rebuilt the decaying sluices, imported the latest methods of tillage, and bullied his slipshod tenants with all the power of his practical common sense and the full fervor of his religious zeal.

The village woke reluctantly from its sleep, yawned, tried to go to sleep again, grumbled, rebelled and threw stones, so that a policeman had to be fetched from nearly ten miles away. He came as soon as he could, but there was some delay as his bees had just swarmed; and on his arrival, very hot and dusty on his bicycle, the rebellion was over. It was not clear what had happened, but the rectory was surrounded by a cheering crowd of the entire village, some two hundred souls, who carried the policeman shoulder high to the rectory, where he was regaled with home-brew and sent home rather mystified, but satisfied that he had restored law and order.

After that memorable day the village never looked back. Under Sylvanus Dale's leadership, one home industry after another was set up and in a few years the village was practically self-supporting.

Though money was none too plentiful, its inhabitants were wealthy in everything that civilized man needs; and the specter of want and unemployment was completely absent. Dale ruled his community as absolutely as any dictator and was rewarded with the devotion of his people.

He had married young, but his wife had died when his daughter Sylvia was born. It was the one great grief of his life, but the time had healed the wound and Sylvia was now a young lady of twenty-three. They were deeply attached to one another and Sylvia was an invaluable second-in-command to her father.

ON THE Sunday morning following the events of the last chapter, Sylvanus Dale was sitting in his study staring in perplexity at a long letter he had received from Murgatroyd by the last post on Saturday. He had read it through rapidly with growing amazement and, it must be confessed, with incredulity and astonishment. He did not mention its contents to Sylvia, but put it aside for further consideration the following morning. And here he was, sitting and staring at the latter, which he had read and reread, instead of composing his sermon for the day.

He went in search of the *Times* of the day before.

"Jessie!" he called from his study door.

"Yes, sir."

"Can you find me yesterday's *Times?*"

"I'll see, sir."

"What is it, Daddy?"

"Oh, Sylvia darling, I want yesterday's *Times* if you can find it. Though I expect

it has been used for lighting fires or something," he grumbled jestingly. "That's what always happens when I want it. At other times the house is littered up with old newspapers. . ."

"Now, Daddy darling, don't be naughty. It wasn't burned. I gave it to Mrs. Gummidge."

"Bother! Have the Sunday papers come yet?"

"Albert Hawkins says that he's heard there is something wrong on the railway and there are no trains running today. So there won't be any Sunday papers."

Dale stared at his daughter in silence and then turned back to his study with his healthy ruddy face paling a little. Sylvia was at his side in an instant.

"Daddy! What is the matter? Aren't you well?"

"Quite well, my dear, but . . I've had a most disturbing letter from Murgatroyd. Er—he's coming over today from Birmingham, and bringing Jamieson and young Thompson with him. They'll be here for lunch."

"Dear old Murgy!" exclaimed Sylvia joyfully. "How lovely. He's a dear. I'll give him what-for for writing disturbing letters."

"No, no dear. It's not . . . it's incredible," he burst out. "I don't believe it. It's impossible, absurd."

"Daddy darling, is there any news of Simpson?"

"Not a word. I expect he was delayed in town and is coming today. Stockbrokers are like that, aren't they? There is a flurry in Brazilian Traction, because the news of the harvest in Lithuania is affected by blight, so he has to stay in London and make a lot of money selling Chinese bonds, that he hasn't got, to people who don't want them."

They both laughed at this absurd travesty of Simpson's activities, and Sylvia succeeded in leading her father out into the garden he loved so well. They were a handsome pair, the father and daughter. He was a hale and hearty man of fifty with twinkling blue eyes set in a rather broad face, ruddy and sun-tanned, under crinkly brown hair going gray at the temples. He was comfortably, but not untidily, dressed in somewhat unclerical garb, though he wore the conventional collar of his calling. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and overtopped his daughter by a head. There was something indefinably masterful about him, though not aggressively so, for his intelligent countenance bespoke tolerance and a very human understanding. He smiled happily as they slowly paced down the path toward the kitchen garden, and he patted his daughter's hand affectionately when she slipped her arm through his.

"You managed that very well, my darling."

"Managed what?"

"Now don't pretend you didn't deliberately edge me out of the study into the garden, because you thought I was worrying unnecessarily about Murgatroyd's letter. Young monkey! But really it is very disturbing. I think Dickson had better take this morning's service. I want to have a good think by myself. Let me see; fifty men with their families, say two hundred . I can work it out. . ."

"Daddy, what *are* you talking about?"

Sylvanus Dale laughed ruefully. "You're right, my dear. I'm an old duffer. Let's forget all about it on this lovely morning. What magnificent weather we are having. There'll be a drought soon, if the weather doesn't break. Not that we need worry, with the Severn running at the bottom of the garden. The Severn won't run dry."

"I expect Murgy is bringing Mr. Jamieson here for a rest, after the terrible shock he must have had when his bridge fell."

"Er—yes, yes, no doubt. But Jamieson isn't likely to be knocked out for long. He's as hard as nails. But there you go again. I thought we were going to change the subject."

"Why! What did I say?"

"About Jamieson. Bless my soul, it's running through my head all the time. It'll never do. We were talking about the weather, weren't we?"

"Yes," Sylvia sighed. She really felt a little worried about her father. It was so unusual for him to show signs of anxiety. A half-humorous explosion of impatience she would have understood. But this continual harping on an unexplained perplexity caused her a vague uneasiness. So she resolutely set herself to coax him out of his anxious mood. "I wish this horrid yellow fog could clear off. Do you think it is blight? Old Jarvis says it is."

"Very likely. It's been uncommonly persistent."

"The women call it rust. They say it is rusting everything."

"Do they?"

"I've noticed it too. Things that want scouring and cleaning do seem to want a lot of extra attention. My dairy things were a sight yesterday. And an old frying-pan I picked up suddenly in the kitch-

en broke off in my hand. Wasn't that odd? Do you think this yellow fog could make things rust more quickly?"

She looked up her father and stopped in consternation. He was staring fixedly at her, almost glaring, and his healthy complexion had gone pale and mottled. His cheeks seemed sunken and he looked ten years older.

"Daddy," she gasped, "you're not well. Let's go in."

"I'm quite well, my child," he answered gravely. "Yes, let us go in. I must work it out. Two hundred souls! It can be done. So Murgatroyd is right and it is all true. Out of the mouths of babes!"

Before Sylvia could reply, Jessie came running down the path.

"Mr. Simpson has arrived, miss."

"Oh, good. Come, Daddy."

"Excuse me, miss, I think there's something wrong with him."

"What do you mean, Jessie?"

"He's all broken up, miss. Covered with dust and dirt. He isn't at all well."

"Good heavens! There must have been a motor accident."

They ran back to the house and hurried to the drawing-room, which opened directly on to the garden through a french window. Sylvia darted in, to find Simpson stretched wearily on the sofa, haggard and unshaven. He had removed one boot, and Sylvia exclaimed at the ragged sock covered with blood. Dale and Jessie hastened in, and with an exclamation of concern Dale seized his wrist, felt for his pulse. He smiled up at them with his parched lips. Jessie already had a glass of water in her hand, and he drank thirstily.

"Thanks," he gasped. "Nothing wrong. Only absolutely done up."

"My dear fellow, what has happened?"

"I've walked from Broadway. Lost my way after Evesham. I've been walking all night."

"Are you hungry?"

"Starving!" he replied with a twisted smile.

Jessie and Sylvia exclaimed at this and ran off to see about rapidly improving a meal. Dale laughed with relief.

"Well, you gave us a fine fright. But if you are as hungry as that, you must be all right. Now not a word until you have had a hearty breakfast. Sylvie will have something ready in less than no time. Then you must tell us what has happened. Not a motor smash, I hope?"

"No, no, not exactly. My car failed. I say, can I take off my boots and socks? My feet are in a bad way. Rotten training I must be in, though these boots aren't meant for tramping in."

Dale fussed round him hospitably, bringing a basin, soap, towel and the iodine bottle. "You ought to get into bed; but I expect you'd like to have breakfast first. Where's your bag?"

"I left it in the car. I've brought a few things in this bundle."

Dale clicked his tongue in astonishment. He was convinced now that there had been an accident and that Simpson was suffering from shock. Walking all the way from Broadway with a bundle of clothing! That was just the way people behaved when suffering from mild concussion. He decided to put Simpson to bed with a hot bottle at his feet as soon as possible, and he changed his mind about administering a tankard of home-brew to the weary man.

JESSIE and Sylvia bustled in with a tray containing tea and eggs, with buttered toast, and the starving man fell ravenously on them, while the two girls saw to getting his room ready for him. Sylvia flashed a look of inquiry at her father, who shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

He went and fetched a pair of socks and slippers for Simpson's lacerated feet and then sat down beside him, noting with satisfaction that his appetite was as hearty as could be desired. He artfully inquired as to any bumps or bruises, but Simpson only looked surprised and said he was not hurt. Dale was, however, so persistent that the weary man at last realized the meaning of his questions and grinned cheerfully at him.

"I haven't had a smash," he said between two enormous mouthfuls of bread and marmalade. "I'm not concussed and I haven't gone mad, though I wonder that I've not. I must tell you all about it."

At that moment Sylvia entered the room and announced that his room was ready and he was to go to bed at once.

"Nonsense," he replied, "I'm perfectly all right."

They tried to persuade him, but he laughingly resisted them. "Wait till I have explained my apparent lunacy. I'll give way so far as to have a hot bath, but I absolutely refuse to go to bed."

They gave it up and Sylvia demanded to know how he had got into such a state.

Simpson hesitated. "I think I had better see your father alone first."

"Don't be silly, Sammy. I'm sick of my-

steries. Here's Daddy been wandering round, rubbing the bald spot on his head and muttering to himself about a mysterious letter from Professor Murgatroyd; and now you come, all covered with blood, and want to see Daddy alone. All right, I won't butt in where I'm not wanted. ."

She stopped, startled by the expression in Simpson's face. He was staring at Dale. "You've heard from Murgatroyd today? Then—you know?"

"Yes. I've been trying not to believe it. It's it's most disturbing."

"There were terrible riots in London yesterday, even before I left. ."

"Why should riots in London worry us down here? Bradley Parva isn't likely to break out into open insurrection!"

Simpson looked at Dale with a meaning look. Dale hesitated for a moment and then, rising from his chair, he nodded. "Of course you are right. The world will know soon enough. And Sylvia must play her part in the plans we must make."

"What on earth ?" began Sylvia.

"Listen, Sylvia dear," Simpson said.

She stopped at the serious look on his face. She liked this big strong man with clear, frank eyes, and she liked his firm voice. He radiated strength and reliability, those qualities which are so attractive to womenkind. Something had alarmed these two men, and Sylvia felt a shiver of foreboding. A shadow seemed to come across the brilliance of the sunshine. There was an undefined danger somewhere! She turned courageously to Simpson. If there were danger, one might find safety and comfort in the arms of a strong man like him. For a moment her heart leaped within her under the grave scrutiny of his eyes; then she drew a deep breath.

"Tell me," she said.

SIMPSON told her all he knew. His tale held his two listeners in deep attention. They had read Murgatroyd's statement in the *Times*, but had missed its significance, buried as they were in the heart of peaceful England. The Severn Bridge disaster had shocked them, the more so, perhaps, because it was their river, flowing so gently at the bottom of the garden. They had felt no apprehension and had busied themselves with their own interests as usual. Even now they listened to Simpson's narrative, or at any rate Sylvia did, as they might listen to a tale of adventure told by a returned traveler.

All around them, the quiet activities of the sun-drenched lands pursued their gentle routine, and they could not visualize the tremendous events which were marching toward them with giant strides, brusquely brushing all normal things aside with harsh brutality. But, to Dale fingering Murgatroyd's letter in his pocket, some appreciation of the dread reality was vouchsafed. He followed Simpson's story in silence, unlike Sylvia, who uttered incredulous exclamations and plied him with eager questions, when she thought the tale was not clear. She cried out at the death of Claudius.

"What sort of man was he?"

"Not a very nice sort. Ruthless and merciless, as these big financiers have to be. It's a horrible game. He was incapable of mercy or pity, or even of ordinary consideration, where his financial operations were concerned."

"Why did he kill himself? What was he afraid of?"

"His last words were 'I can see what is coming.' He was afraid of continuing to live in a world where brute strength would count for more than brains. His lively imagination saw the things which were to come."

"Simmy!" she gasped.

"Yes," said Dale, "I see. I'm beginning to grasp it. Go on, Simmy."

Simpson continued his story, sparing them nothing. They exclaimed in horror at the collapse of the Terminal building.

"It was a fairly new building, constructed like all modern erections on a steel framework. The stone facings merely kept the wind out and had in themselves no sufficient strength to stand up alone. As soon as the steel frame rotted away, the whole thing fell crashing to the ground. It was the first of many. All modern structures, the whole of Regent Street for example, are doomed, if they have not al-

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ready crashed. The older buildings, made of honest brick or stone, will survive."

"Then there is some hope?"

"Who can say? It will be a miracle if serious fires do not break out in the collapsing sections, and these might spread unchecked by a helpless fire brigade. The water mains, hydrants, the very engines themselves will have rotted away before long. But let me continue my story."

He went on to tell them of his tramp from the city to the Marble Arch and his motor journey to Broadway.

"Only fifteen miles way, and I thought I was practically here. By Jove, one's ideas of distance have to be revised, when you slip back from the Iron Age to the Stone Age. Fifteen miles! Half an hour's run in a car. A whole night and a half a day floundering about in the darkness, when on foot. Though I suppose a savage or a tribesman would think nothing of it and would smell his way even on a pitch dark night."

"But why didn't you stay at Broadway, even if you had to sleep under a hedge?"

"I was worried about you. Claudius said, 'You're young and strong. Get away somewhere to the Highlands or Wales.' I didn't take in his meaning at the time, but he was right. I am young and strong and my place is by the side of those I—those who . . ."

"Simmy, dear!" said Sylvia softly.

"Bless my soul!" cried the rector, stopping in his agitated pacing and rubbing the back of his head.

"Daddy, do stop rubbing your bald patch. You'll have no hair left soon."

There was the sound of a car outside and the bustle of people arriving. Sylvia ran to the door and shouted a joyous welcome.

"Murgy!"

The spare figure of Professor Murgatroyd descended from the car. He smiled at her boisterous greetings and kissed her affectionately.

"How is my god-daughter? Waxing daily in wickedness and guile like all her sex, I suppose?"

"How do you do, Mr. Jamieson? I apologize for Murgy's manners. It's my fault really. I've brought him up very badly. He's my godfather, you know, and I feel the responsibility."

"Aweel, he's no such discredit to ye."

"Hullo, Tommy."

"Hullo, Sylvie."

They all trooped into the rectory, where Simpson limped to his feet to greet them.

"So your car hasn't given out yet?"

"No. I think it will last till we get back to Birmingham tonight."

"I wouldn't be too sure. Mine went phut last night."

"Mine has been treated by a process with which I am experimenting and the decay may be retarded. But I'll tell you all about that presently. When did you leave London?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"And he's had the most exciting adventures. Look at his poor feet!"

"I had to walk from Broadway, because my car had broken down and I couldn't get another."

Simpson rapidly sketched his story again for the benefit of the newcomers. They listened intently and said they had had similar experiences in Birmingham.

"The towns are taking alarm and it won't be long before a very serious situation arises."

SYLVIA had perched herself on the arm of Murgatroyd's chair and followed their desultory discussion with eager interest. But the men were unwilling to pursue the matter too deeply before her; they shrank from letting her know too clearly the horrors they foresaw. Sylvia was conscious of this restraint and grew increasingly impatient with it. At last she could contain herself no longer, when her father suggested that they should go to his study.

"Look here, Daddy, you are still trying to be very mysterious, but the sooner you realize that I am not a child the better it will be for you all. I won't be treated like this. If you go to your study, I shall come too."

"Well, Sylvie dear . . . ."

"She's right," broke in Simpson. "She ought to know."

"Good for you, Simmy. What do you think, Tommy?"

Thompson hesitated and his nervous, pale features contracted in an expression of reluctance. "I would like to keep the knowledge of this and of all ugly and horrible things from you, if I could." Then he threw out his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "But it's no good. The whole world will know soon. Better tell her."

Murgatroyd leaned back in his chair and drew a deep breath.

"I will be as brief and as clear as possible. It is really quite simple to state, Sylvie dear. All the iron and steel in the world is rusting away with a terrific rapidity. In a few weeks it will all be gone except for

a greenish-blue powder. It only started recently, and it is getting rapidly worse."

"Yes, I see. I've noticed that."

"What!"

"Of course. A woman knows all about cleaning and scouring. We've noticed that metals have been tarnishing badly, yes, and needles breaking more often. The village women say it is due to the fog."

"Maybe they are not far wrong."

"But, Murgy, what does it really matter? Why do you look so worried about it?. . . Why are you so silent? They will have to find a substitute for iron, that's all. That's your special line, isn't it, metallurgy? Yours too, Tommy. Research. . . Why doesn't someone speak? These accidents have been dreadful, I know, but the engineers will overcome them. . . . What is it? We needn't worry here in Bradley Parva. Daddy grows everything on the Glebe farm and we don't depend on iron—not very much."

Murgatroyd laid his long thin hand on Sylvia's knee, as she sat perched on the arm of his chair. "Think, Sylvia, think. Remember, *all* the iron and steel."

Sylvia looked round the room and out of the window. "Yes, I see. My needles and sewing machine. The cooking things. The pipes and taps. The garden spades and things. The ploughs, scythes, and reaping machines."

"Go on, Sylvie."

"The fences, the railways, bridges, and trains. The machinery, motors and ships." She was a little dazed by the list she had made. A startled look come into her eyes.

"Think again, Sylvie, think hard."

"Yes. . I'm beginning to see. You mean, how will all the poor people in the towns live? I remember, Daddy, you have often told us that three-quarters of the nation's food is imported. And of course there will soon be no ships to bring the food." Her eyes opened wide as the full implications of what she was saying broke upon her. "Why, there soon won't be enough to go round. How awful!"

"Yes," Dale burst out, "that's as far as I have got. Murgatroyd, the government will have to commandeer supplies, build wooden ships, restrain the mob, ration us all."

"Restrain the mob? How?"

"The troops!"

"Armed with wooden clubs!"

There was a silence at this. Sylvia went across to her father and sat on his knee with her arm around his neck. She felt a little frightened. Dale smiled quickly at her and then he turned to Murgatroyd.

"What, then, is before us?"

"Listen. The population of the country is forty-five millions. If every yard of soil could be intensively cultivated, there might perhaps be a bare subsistence for us all. But the nation cannot wait till next harvest, nor can intensive cultivation be adopted with the primitive implements of the Stone Age. No. I can see no hope. Out of that forty-five million, forty million or more must starve to death during the coming winter."

Dale and his daughter cried out with horror at this. Simpson looked at them gravely. "Now do you understand? It's dreadful, but it is inevitable. That is why I hurried to your side."

"Let us face this horrible thing squarely. I spoke of starvation, but that is not all. Many will perish in the hand-to-hand fighting for food."

"Fighting!" cried Dale. "Yes, of course, fighting hand to hand with the weapons of the Stone Age!"

MURGATROYD'S thin hands clasped each other nervously, while he relentlessly continued his forcast. "The weak and the old will be struck down. The strong—a few of them— will survive, and with them the women whom they choose to protect."

Simpson sprang to his feet and strode quickly to Sylvia. Thompson buried his head in his hands. The professor glanced pityingly at the young people. "I'm sorry, Sylvie dear, but I want you to face reality and not drift till it is too late. Already the frightened crowd in London is breaking loose. Think of the pitiful attempts to hoard food. There will be a few days—or hours—of angry recriminations, and then a rough, starving crowd battering down the doors of the hoarders.

"Think of the rapid dissipation of the stocks in the shops—the hungry, helpless suburban dwellers not knowing which way to turn. There will be frenzied rushes on the rumor of supplies at the docks or elsewhere . . and after a few weeks of occasional insufficient food, the starving mob will break loose, roaming the countryside, looting and killing in the frantic search for food. By that time death by starvation will have visited hundreds, soon to be thousands . . . and then millions! The horror of it! It is the greatest catastrophe that has ever fallen upon the human race."

"Except the Flood," Dale's voice rang out. "The ways of God are strange. Per-

haps this is a new cleansing of the world to make way for better things." The color was returning to his sunburned cheeks, which had paled during Murgatroyd's terrifying recital. His eyes gazed into the distance with a rapt expression.

Murgatroyd smiled frostily. "Maybe," he said dryly, "but I am a man of science, interested in the immediate emergency."

Dale apparently did not hear him, but the others caught at his words. It was Simpson who voiced their feelings.

"You said just now you wanted us to face reality before it was too late. Too late for what?"

"I was coming to that. You know, of course, of my private research laboratory in Birmingham. Thompson is my chief assistant there." He smiled at the young man, who responded wanly. "We think there is the faintest glimmer of hope that we may discover an alloy, which will be immune from this universal rot. A substitute for iron, as Sylvie said. I won't trouble you with technical details, but there is just a possibility that we are on the right track. It will take months of research, but, if we succeed, we shall save the human race from relapsing into savagery."

Dale stared at him absently. "A new Flood and a new Noah. I wonder."

Murgatroyd sprang to his feet, dominating them with his masterful mind. "I have planned it all out. Jamieson is joining us; we need his energy and courage. We shall fortify the laboratory and provision ourselves for a year. We shall be a carefully selected band of men, trustworthy and strong. They will possess the necessary technical skill to build the new machines, when we discover the new alloy. We shall be disciplined to fight. . . ."

"A new Noah! How wonderful!"

Simpson caught the infection of the scientist's enthusiasm. Hope flamed within him. "And you will take us in with you?"

"No!"

They all sprang to their feet at this. Simpson flushed angrily and cried out in protest, but Murgatroyd was adamant.

"No! There will only be those technicians and engineers essential for our work. The food is limited."

"But—but Sylvia, man! You can't abandon her. ."

"Bide a wee, laddie, and ye'll see. He's no so daft as ye think." Jamieson had sat in silence while Murgatroyd expounded, but he spoke up now, restraining the impetuous Simpson by gently but firmly holding his arm in a friendly grip. Sylvia threw him a grateful glance and a quick smile. She liked the rugged little Scot.

"We need your help, Dale," Murgatroyd said. "A certain amount of fresh food and a replenishment of our supplies from outside are both essential. At the end of the coming winter, the land will be depopulated and there will only be left those who, like yourselves, can live on the land, and a few marauding bands of robbers. We shall need friends outside. Jamieson and I immediately thought of you. You have made a practice of living on the land and you have a devoted band of workers. You must be our allies."

DALE passed his hand over his brow. The inspired look in his eyes still persisted. "Yes, I see," he answered slowly.

"As Murgatroyd says, we must survive," Jamieson observed. "And by that, I mean your village, Dale, as well as our group of workers in the Birmingham laboratory. We will not let ourselves slip back into savagery, but we shall certainly have to fight to preserve ourselves against those who care only for filling their bellies. It has happened before in history. Civilization has always had to fight to keep back the hosts of Midian."

Dale's eyes sparkled anew. The practical view of affairs was reasserting itself in his mind.

"Truly the ways of God are wonderful. Murgatroyd, you could not have come to a better man for he furtherance of your plan."

"My dear fellow, of course. . .

"No, no, I don't mean it that way. Perhaps you too were led by a power higher than ourselves. It is this matter of the ancient defense of this village. It was impregnable in ancient times. Well, we are slipping back to ancient times, and I can make it impregnable once more against the attacks of savages, God forgive me for calling our own people by that name. For you are right, Jamieson, the starving people will fight to get food for themselves and their women."

"But tell us about making the village impregnable."

"I have done a great deal of repair to the ancient dykes and sluices and my men could surround the village almost entirely with water by opening suitable sluices at the right time. The ford over the Severn was defended by a small fort in Roman times. Well, we can reconstruct it and gar-

rison it. A stout wall or stockade will block the isthmus, which will remain uncovered by flood-water, and the Severn itself will defend our remaining flanks. I see it all. It is a defensive position of astonishing strength against Stone Age weapons. Murgatroyd, you are right. The women's place is here at Bradley Parva. Your men must move their families here as rapidly and as unobtrusively as possible during the few days that are vouchsafed to us. We will open the sluice gates tomorrow!"

"They'll open themselves in a day or two, as soon as the iron rots!"

"True, but the smaller ones are made of wood and they'll hold. I can control the flooding. Simmy will stay here and help me. He can't get to London anyway."

"Tommy, Jamieson, and I must start to Birmingham after lunch," said Murgatroyd.

Murgatroyd and Jamieson strolled off together down one of the paths leading to the river. Thompson, after a brief hesitation, followed them at a distance. Sylvia disappeared to see about the bread and cheese, while Dale fumbled in his desk for the key of the cool cellar in which the home-brew was kept. Simpson limped across the room to him.

"Can I have a word with you in private?"

Dale looked up, surprised. "Of course, Simmy, what is it about? But come into the study. We shall be undisturbed there."

They went through a door leading direct to Dale's study which, like the room they had just left, opened direct onto the garden through a french window. It was in this room that Dale administered the affairs of the village, and it bore many traces of the temporal and spiritual activities of the rector. A large roll-top desk occupied a good deal of space and one wall was well-lined with a miscellaneous collection of books. Devotional works by ancient and modern writers, the latest speculations of the more recent scientists and astronomers, alternated with books on the law relating to land tenure and a sprinkling of lighter volumes of travel and adventure, with a fair selection of novels. Both the rector and his daughter found time to read a good deal.

Dale put Simpson into an arm-chair, and sat himself at his desk, filling a pipe.

"Well, Simmy, what's the trouble?"

Simpson shuffled his sore feet uncomfortably before replying. "It's a little difficult to say what I want to say."

Dale puffed his pipe in silence and Simpson went on. "You see, it's about Sylvia."

Dale took out his pipe and opened his mouth to speak. But he changed his mind and put his pipe back.

"It's this way. Do you remember what I told you Claudius said? He foresaw that, forgive me, the world was only going to be safe for the young and strong. The weak will go to the wall! That is what has been beating in my brain ever since. Claudius saw thingse clearly in a moment of vision at the hour of his death! What will happen to the women?"

"Well, Simmy?"

"Don't you see, sir? Starving men don't trouble about ethics. Good heavens, must I put it in plain blunt words? What chance does a young and attractive woman stand during the times to come? She can't fight for herself. She will be the prey of any man who is strong enough to take her and keep her, whether she likes it or not."

"My men aren't savages. Sylvia will be quite safe here!"

"If all goes well, yes. But if anything happens. Things may go badly wrong, and it may be that Sylvia will need . . someone young and strong to protect her."

"I see. Yes, I see your point. It is true I am not as young as I was, though I think, Simmy, I could still put up a pretty good show, with or without the gloves. . . ."

"I'm sure of it. But I want you to marry me to Sylvia at once!"

Dale's eyes twinkled.

"Good heavens, Simmy, do you want me to start being Father Abraham by giving my daughter in marriage in good old Biblical fashion? You ought to labor seven years for her first."

"I'd labor my whole life for Sylvia. I have always loved her."

DALE dropped his chaffing manner. He liked Simpson and had often wondered whether the two young people were drawn to each other.

"Well, Simmy, I need hardly say that I should welcome you as a son-in-law, if Sylvia consents. But you must get her consent first. I am impressed by the urgency of your request, but I don't think that things are as desperate, in regard to her, as you fear, however hard it may go with the poor souls outside our little settlement. Until you heard of our, or rather Murgatroyd's, plans I can understand that you felt you must be by her side. But things are different now and we can cling to the conventions of the twentieth century in our love-making."

"I suppose so. But if she consents, will you marry us at once?"

There came a sudden twang from the wall, and a picture plumped heavily to the ground, smashing its glass with a musical tinkle. The two men stared at one another. Then Dale went and picked the picture up, fingering the broken wire as he did so. The wire crumbled in his hand to a greenish-blue powder.

Dale sighed heavily and then, crossing to where Simpson sat, he placed his hand on his shoulder. "Very well, Simmy, I agree. If Sylvia will have you, I will marry you at once. She is out in the garden."

Simpson jumped to his feet and gripped the rector's hand warmly. "I'll go to her now," he cried, and strode quickly to the window, which stood wide open to the lawn.

There he stopped with a frown of vexation; Sylvia was indeed in the garden, but that fellow Thompson was with her. Worse still, Sylvia had set the tray of refreshments on a rustic table and was walking slowly toward the shrubbery with him. Dale left the study to draw the home-brew, and Simpson turned back annoyed and impatient into the room again. Anyway, he reflected, the fellow would be going soon. Surely Sylvia couldn't see anything in that pale youngster. He'd be no use in a crisis.

A few minutes earlier Sylvia had collected a tray of bread and cheese, both of her own making, together with a generous pile of butter from their own dairy, and had gone into the garden to set it out on a table under a tree. There she found Thompson sitting alone in a dejected attitude. He sprang nervously to his feet and took the tray from her, helping her to set out the simple meal.

"How splendid you are," he said in a low voice.

She looked at him, surprised.

Thompson's nervous face twitched. "I would give anything if this horrible nightmare could disappear. I couldn't stand it much longer," he burst out.

"Is it going to be so very dreadful?"

"It isn't that. I don't mind for myself. Whatever happens. I'm afraid for those we love."

"Those we love? But .

"Those we used to dream of protecting from all the unpleasant things of life."

Sylvia's heart began to beat most uncomfortably hard. She tried to behave toward the slim young man in a motherly way. She had often found that to be an effective way of fending off an impulsive male. But somehow she could not. Instead she found herself answering softly in tremulous response to his tense manner.

"Did you dream of that?"

"It's only a dream now."

"What do you mean?"

"If the world had remained as it was, I might have lived and worked for . . . for someone. . ."

"Well?"

Thompson threw out his hands in a hopeless gesture. "What's the use. It's only a dream now. A nightmare. There's nothing left. Only work . . . looking for the new metal."

Sylvia felt herself strangely drawn toward this slender man with the large black eyes. She longed to take him in her strong, capable arms and smooth away the misery which burned in his somber eyes. Yet something restrained her, and she could only wait for him to speak again.

"Look at me!" he cried. "I'm no good in a Stone Age! Only those who are strong have the right to ask anyone to let them protect them from danger."

"There are finer things than brute force."

"It's no use, I tell you." He was almost hysterical.

"To discover the new metal would be a fine thing. Women don't always worship muscle."

"Let me go. You have been very, very kind to me, and I have . . . worshiped the ground you walked on."

"To save the human race—that would be worth while for a girl to wait for."

"Sylvie, don't make it hard for me. I was a fool to say what I did. I just meant to say good-by and go away without. . . ."

"Good-by?"

"Yes, darling. But I couldn't do it. Oh, my darling, I couldn't do it. What a useless fool I am!"

Their walk had taken them deep into the old shrubbery, far from the others. Thompson was a little ahead of Sylvia, shaking with the intensity of his grief. Tears stood in his fine eyes. Sylvia pulled him round gently face to face with her.

"Listen, Tommy. You are going back to your work today. Fine work, a man's work. Work that a man and his girl can be proud of. If you succeed—and you will—I shall be waiting for you. And if you fail, I'll love you just the same, and we'll go down together hand in hand."

Young Thompson turned an amazed and incredulous look upon her. Incredulity.

that merged into realization of the great thing which had come into his life. Sylvia spoke no word more, but her radiant young face told him all that his heart desired.

Hungrily he gathered her into his arms. . . .

CHAPTER VI

THE FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

"I'M thinking," said Jamieson, peering out of the window, "there'll be a wee bit of a fight before long. Aweel, we're ready."

He and Murgatroyd were conferring in the office room of Murgatroyd's laboratory in Birmingham. It was a week since they had paid the visit to Bradley Parva. A week crowded with intense activity and ceaseless work, which had left little time for brooding over the onset of the great calamity which had befallen the world.

There were about two hundred men employed in the laboratory and the workshops attached to it. Murgatroyd had called them together and explained his intentions fully to them. Sheer disbelief had at first impeded the preparation of the laboratory for the trials to come; but the events of the Monday and Tuesday, following their return to Birmingham shook the incredulity of those who could not bring themselves to believe in the reality of the disintegration of iron. Out in the city on Wednesday, there was rioting and the looting of food shops, sternly repressed by the authorities. It was rumored that a city rationing committee had been set up for the orderly distribution of the available stocks of food, but the committee's work was sorely impeded by the complete breakdown of all the usual means of communication. In face of this disquieting news a deputation of employees came to Murgatroyd and unreservedly threw in their lot with him. On the next day the men's families were removed to Bradley Parva.

Meanwhile the laboratory was rapidly put into a state of defense. Provisions for one year had been laid in under instructions telegraphed from London by Murgatroyd, immediately after the meeting at the Institution of Civil Engineers at which he had disclosed his discovery. The laboratory walls were strengthened where necessary, some of them being old and unable for long to withstand a battering-ram.

Unnecessary doors and gates were permanently blocked up. Arrangements were made to collect the rainwater from all roofs and store it in large tanks of concrete. Fortunately the engineering store shed was well stocked, but Murgatroyd made assurance doubly sure by ordering in plentiful supplies of everything they were likely to need during their intensified research.

All their preparations were made in secrecy. Murgatroyd was anxious to escape publicity as far as possible, for he feared interference with his preparations by the authorities, who were becoming increasingly alarmed. He had tried to conceal his departure from London, but before the telephone service finally broke down he had constantly been run up by all sorts of people. Among them a frienzied Home Secretary had importuned him at intervals.

"But, good heavens, Professor, we can't go on like this. It's quite impossible. There'll be questions in the House, and I must be in a position to answer them. . . What? What? I can't hear you. But there's the deputation from the Associated Milk Bottlers the day after tomorrow! If they come out on strike, the milk of the community will be endangered. Don't you understand? It's all most inconvenient, most disturbing. . . No need to bother about trifles? Trifles! These negotiations with the milk bottlers are most important. Yes, the Associated Milk Bottlers, I keep on telling you . . " So the distant voice babbled on, still bleating in the midst of a world catastrophe about the moves in a political game, until Murgatroyd in weariness and disgust put the receiver down, leaving the distressed Home Secretary to blather into an unresponsive transmitter somewhere in Whitehall.

The broadcasting service lapsed into silence, soon after the announcer in his usual suave tones had broadcast the information in the second news that, owing to the imminent collapse of the Droitwich towers, there would be a few minutes delay, while other arrangements were made by the engineers. It was hoped that the usual program of dance music relayed from . . and then there was silence. A million listeners twirled the knobs of their radios. Some of them heard an hysterical Italian voice pouring forth a torrent of despair, but even that soon faded, and nothing could be heard but an occasional atmospheric. Listeners went to bed, but not to sleep. The suave voice of the announcer had murdered sleep for them.

With the final breakdown of posts, telegraphs, telephones and wireless, Murgatroyd experienced a feeling of relief. The

chances of interference with his plans were now more remote. The news of disaster and collapse on every side had poured in so continually that his sense had become dulled to them. The recital of such an unparalleled series of catastrophes could serve no useful purpose, and both Murgatroyd and his associates ceased to seek news. Where almost everything was disintegrating, they simply shrugged their shoulders and went about their work. So strangely, so amazingly adaptable is human nature!

But they were not to escape from the attentions of the desperate citizens of Birmingham so easily. Signs soon became noticeable that their seclusion had been detected, in spite of the fact that no one had ventured out of the fortified zone surrounding the laboratory for the remainder of the week in hope that they would be unmolested. Two great conflagrations had been seen raging unchecked in the city, and at one time they were alarmed lest the fire should sweep in their direction. But the fires died down into smouldering ruins, for the sultry fog-laden air still hung heavy over the land so that there was no wind to fan the flames.

At times a confused roar of human voices could be heard from the doomed town, and once there was the rattle of musketry. The men inside the defenses were uneasy at these sounds and tended to gather into groups after work hours, muttering anxiously among themselves. Their families were safe with Dale, but they had many friends and relations outside about whom they were worried. On Saturday morning, it was reported to Jamieson that there were six men missing. No mystery attached to their disappearance; they had told their mates they were going out to get news of their friends.

That Saturday seems to have been a day of terror in Birmingham. The top windows of the office building commanded a view over a part of the vicinity. The ruins of collapsed steel-frame buildings left ugly gaps in the serried masses of buildings that hemmed them in. But there were a large number of older structures of solid masonry, and these were standing undamaged. Here and there between them they could catch a glimpse of the streets, and it was obvious that things were seriously wrong. Confused shouting and firing continued throughout the day, and mobs could be seen parading the streets from time to time. Work in the laboratory was carried on as well as possible, but the men were uneasy.

WHEN night fell the city was dark, save for a red glare in the sky from a burning warehouse about a mile away. Toward the center of the town the roar of a mighty crowd came faintly to their ears, but the roadway leading to the laboratory was empty. It was a road lined entirely by factories and offices, now deserted. Jamieson had posted sentries at the main gate, and they reported all quiet in the immediate neighborhood.

At about half past ten there came a sudden alarm. Shouts, cries, and the beat of running footsteps echoed in the once empty street. Some fugitives were being chased by a mob. Two men, running desperately, were tearing along the street, pursued by an infuriated crowd armed with sticks, clubs, broken bottles and all the armory of primitive savagery. They could be dimly discerned in the red glare from the sky, which threw a hellish illumination over everything. Jamieson was fortunately near the gate, making his final rounds of the night; and at a hasty summons from the sentry he dashed with a posse of men to the look-out post. He took in the situation at a glance, but before he could attempt a rescue a horrified shout arose from the men.

"It's Alf Perkins and Nobby Clark!" Two of the six missing men!

At that moment one of the wretched fugitives tripped and fell. His companion saw what had happened and hesitated for an instant. The mob, too, marked the fall of the hunted man, but they did not hesitate. With a howl of triumph, a section of the mob hurled themselves upon the unfortunate man, now struggling to rise. In an instant he was down again, beaten to the ground under a rain of merciless blows.

A horrible scream sounded—even above the angry snarling of the savages, who were battering the life out of their victim with their crude weapons. They tore at him like fighting dogs, and for a moment the feebly struggling body of the murdered man appeared shoulder-high as the frenzied savages tore at him in their insensate rage. The screams ceased abruptly, and the mob turned its attention to the other man, who had so fatally hesitated in his flight.

He had taken up a stand in a doorway, seeing that he was about to be overtaken, and was putting up a good fight against

those who had continued the pursuit, while their fellows tore the other man to pieces alive. A blow from his fist had sent the foremost of his pursuers down, and he snatched the man's club, with which he was for the time holding his own. But now the remainder of the howling mob, their taste of blood whetted, bore down on him. There appeared to be some sort of a leader, and he tried to exercise control over his fellows.

"Catch him alive and hang him!" he roared, and there was an answering shout of approval.

"Hanging's too good," howled the shrill voice of a woman in the background. "Burn him alive."

A maniacal howl greeted this, and an ugly surge took place toward the desperate man, who was holding the unequal odds at bay. In a few moments all would have been over, but Jamieson had now collected his men, infuriated at the sight of the attack on one of their friends. The main gate of the laboratory was flung open, and Jamieson charged at the head of his men, armed with formidable clubs. The mob was completely taken by surprise, but a sharp fight ensued.

Jamieson's men were in no mood for a simple rescue, which was soon affected. Their blood was up, and a hearty pursuit of the rapidly retreating brutes endangered Jamieson's little force. However, they were well disciplined, and in answer to Jamieson's whistle, they came trooping back, leaving a dozen or so motionless forms on the ground. With a murmur of horror they recovered the body of the murdered man, who proved to be Nobby Clark, a great favorite with everyone. The survivor, Alf Perkins, incoherent and shaking with terror, was tenderly lifted and taken into the laboratory. Like a terrified dog, he was almost incapable of distinguishing friend from enemy, and he struggled with his rescuers, rolling his eyes in terror. It was Jamieson who succeeded in pacifying him, his homely Scots tongue having a soothing effect.

"Gently, laddie, gently. Ye're with friends the noo."

GRADUALLY Alf Perkins allowed himself to be led away to the hospital ward in a quiet corner of the workshop, where the medical officer soon quieted him with a sedative. He fell into a deep sleep, so that it was not until the morrow that they were able to get a coherent story from him.

Next morning he was able to sit up in bed, not much the worse for his terrible experiences. He had a number of cuts and bruises, but these were not serious. He had slept off the effects of his fright and spoke with shame of his hysterical behavior when rescued.

"Though when you hear what I've been through, I think you will understand, sir. I was a fool to go out at all. Never again!"

"That's all right, Perkins. I'll say no more about that. Now tell us exactly what happened. This may lead to serious consequences for us, and I must know precisely how we stand." Murgatroyd spoke kindly in view of the man's obvious distress. But he was alarmed by the forced disclosure of their stronghold, and annoyed at the stupidity of the six men who had slipped out against his orders.

"That's right, sir. I'm afraid it is a serious matter for us; and bitterly sorry I am, if I've put those devils on our track. Though they would have found us sooner or later, as I think you will see."

"What do you mean?"

Jamieson intervened, suggesting that the man should tell his story in his own way, and Murgatroyd agreed. The two men were sitting by the wounded man's bed together with the doctor. Jamieson handed the patient a cigarette, and the man flashed a grateful look at him. Then he began his tale, an astonishing and well-nigh incredible story of the relapse of the law-abiding city of Birmingham into savagery, under the fear of hunger and starvation.

The six deserters had slipped out together, but Perkins and Nobby Clark had soon separated from them. Perkins was anxious about his cousin—a baker who lived not far off in New Street over his shop together with his wife and two daughters. They were a happy and prosperous little family; the daughters helped in the business, and quite a large circle of customers had been built up. The two men had been going out a good deal with the young ladies, taking them to the pictures and so forth, and although there was no formal engagement, the young people were attracted to one another. The steady and well-paid employees in the celebrated laboratories of Professor Murgatroyd were welcomed in the household of the baker,

WAR BONDS NOW MEAN VICTORY TO COME!

and in the normal course of events the youngsters would undoubtedly have been married happily.

"I'm telling you this," Perkins said apologetically, "because I want you to understand why I saw red. God, if I could only have been in time. . " His voice shook and he showed signs of breaking down again. Jamieson calmed him like a father soothing a child, and the man recovered himself with an effort.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm all right now. I'll tell you all about it. We made straight for my cousin's place in New Street. I didn't half like the looks of things, I can tell you. Collapsed buildings and bridges everywhere. It fair gave me the creeps. No traffic on wheels, and the tram-lines rotted away, leaving awkward slots in the road big enough to break your ankle in. And the people! Slinking about in silence mostly, looking everywhere for scraps of grub. More like stray cats and dogs than people! Quiet-like, they were, pale and exhausted some of them, just wandering about bewildered and not knowing which way to turn. I didn't see any police or soldiers at first. I reckon they were wanted elsewhere, if they weren't starving like the rest.

"This was in the business part of the town, you understand. I did not like the look of things there, but it was much worse when we got to the shops. Most of them were wrecked, especially the food shops. The windows were smashed in, and there were still people poking about among the ruins to see if they could find anything, though I could see that the places had been picked clean. That's what gave us our first real fright. The mob had wrecked and looted the food shops! What about my cousin's place? We hurried along, noticing that here and there a shop was all shuttered up and was apparently untouched. The mob had gone for the easiest prey, and we hoped that my cousin's shop might yet be standing unharmed.

"WE HEARD groans coming from one of the wrecked shops and, in spite of our anxiety, we felt we couldn't pass by unheeding. Though, mind you, nobody else seemed to worry. We asked one bloke to come in and help us, but he only grunted something about damned food hoarders and shuffled off.

"We found the proprietor of the looted shop in a bad way, bashed about the head and his ribs stove in. He died within a few minutes without speaking. His whole house was a wreck, the floor ripped up and every cupboard wrenched open. There was a lot of blood in a top attic and the window was smashed. Looking out of it we could see the body of a woman lying in the back yard. We ran down to her, but she was dead. She must have jumped out of the window—unless they chucked her out."

A murmur of horror broke from his hearers, and the man paused for a moment, his features working. Then he pulled himself together and continued his narrative.

"They aren't brutes like that in Birmingham. I don't understand it. The worst characters in the town must have got the upper hand. That's what you're thinking, aren't you? That's what I thought, and that's what Nobby Clark and I said to each other. Poor old Nobby! But we didn't stay there talking for long; we hurried off in the direction of my cousin's place in a real fright, I can tell you. A tough spoke to us as we came out into the street; half-starved he looked. 'No good going in there, mate,' he said. 'It's been picked clean this morning. Damned food hoarders!'

"Food hoarders! That was the word we kept on hearing. Everyone was going hungry, and the greatest crime in the eyes of the wretched people was to keep back supplies of food. We didn't reply, but dashed off as fast as we could. As we turned into New Street, we saw that there was something up, and my heart sank.

"There was an angry mob in front of us, roaring up at a shuttered house, and I saw with horror that it was my cousin's shop that was beseiged. He had painted out his name and the words 'Baker and Confectioner' with black paint; but, after a day or two, the words began to show through, and this was enough evidence for the mob to roar with fury at him for a food hoarder. We tried to push our way through the crowd, but it was hopeless. They had leaders of sorts, and a gang of toughs was keeping the crowd back, while organized parties were getting ready to batter the door down.

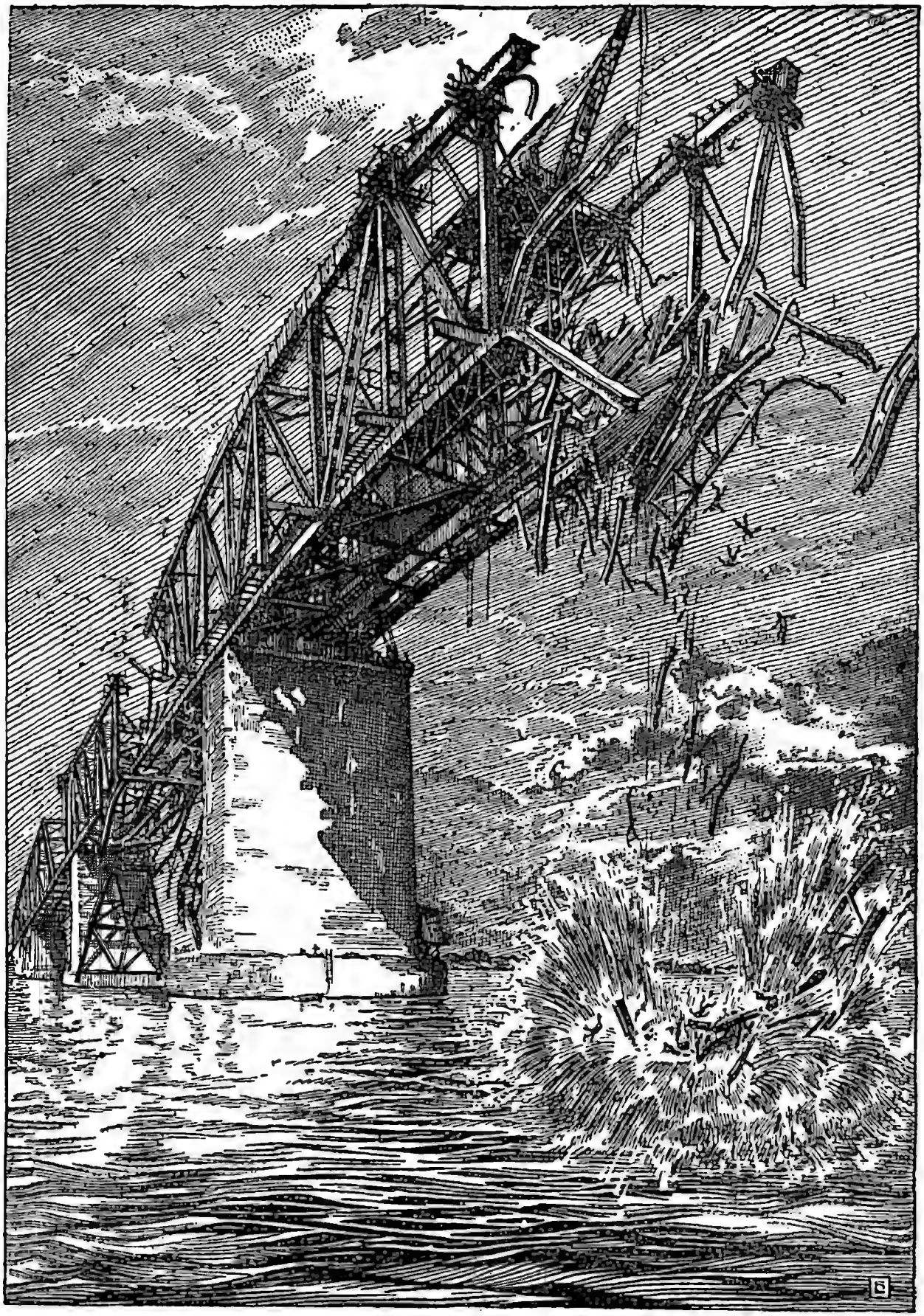
" 'Where are the police?' I asked a bystander.

"He gave me a queer look. He didn't reply to my question at first, but made as if to move off. Then he came back and asked a question himself.

" 'Feelin' hungry, mate?'

" 'No,' I answered, without thinking much about it.

"He gave me another queer look and



The Fall of the Severn Bridge

spat. 'Better go and call the police yourself,' he snarled, and he hurried off.

"The crowd surged this way and that, and it was hard to keep our feet. And all the time they kept up a savage roaring, more like wild beasts at feeding-time than human beings. Then I tumbled to it. They were starving and expected to find food in the house when the doors were bashed in. It was horrible to see their faces, the women as bad as the men—and worse. There was one woman carrying a dead baby, which she held up for them to see while she harangued them. Out of her senses, maybe, but they howled and roared in response.

"Someone cried that the soldiers were coming, and there was a rush to escape. I breathed a prayer of thanksgiving, and hoped that relief would come in time. My cousin heard the cries, for I saw his white face at an upper window for a moment when he tried to see whether it was true that the soldiers were coming. He turned back to the room and one of his daughters, bolder than he was, flung up the window and craned out.

"It was my girl, sir, and I tried to attract her attention, but it was no good. As soon as the mob saw her, they went mad. The women were the worst. They screamed horrible things at her, promising what they would do as soon as they caught her. And the men's faces! I broke into a sweat and struggled once more to reach the door, Nobby Clark with me. But it was hopeless. The crowd simply jammed our efforts, as they pressed nearer to hurl filthy threats at the girl, who faced them white-faced but with calm courage. Then she slammed the window down and I never saw her again—that is, not until oh, my God! . ."

FROZEN with horror at his ghastly narrative, Murgatroyd and the others could only wait until Perkins ceased his gasping sobs and went on.

"You'll blame me for not rescuing them, but what could I do? We tried to shove our way, but the yelling mob only thought we were trying to get a front place for the rush for food when the door went down, and they pushed us back with foul oaths. Then there came a loud roar as a party of toughs with an improvised battering-ram was seen approaching. The mob made way for them quick enough. Under the direction of a leader, the battering-ram was poised and rushed at the door. It splintered, but stood better than I thought possible. The battering-ram was run back for another blow, but just at that moment the soldiers arrived.

"I could see an officer on horseback directing them, and a good many of the more timid folk rushed down the street away from them. In an opening in the crowd I could see the soldiers, a handful of them in disciplined ranks across the roadway. The mob leader collected his men and they made a rush. The officer gave the order to fire. It was horrible! The rifles burst in their hands. The mob shrieked in triumph and made a rush. It was all over in a few seconds. The officer was dragged from his horse and torn to pieces, struggling and fighting to the last. The men were overwhelmed; they tried to use their rifles as clubs, but they broke in their hands. They were hunted down one by one and battered to death. Then the triumphant mob returned, with a low, menacing growl, to the task of smashing their way into my cousin's shop.

"While the fight with the soldiers was going on, Nobby Clark and I worked our way round to the back of the shop, thinking we might be able to get in that way. But we found that parties were on the watch there too; the attack on the shop had evidently been carefully organized, in spite of the apparent disorder of the mob. We went round to the front again and saw that the crowd had once more closed around the doomed house. The party with the battering-ram had once more raised their weapon, and we were just in time to see the door go down with a splintering crash. I wish I had died before I saw. . . They yelled like fiends from hell. 'Hang them,' they shrieked. . ."

Jamieson sprang to his feet, his eyes ablaze. "The devils!" he muttered.

"The leader and his men were first into the house. In a few seconds, loaves of bread and a sack of flour were flung out. With a wild roar the mob broke loose and poured into the house. . . The old man was the first to be brought out, all bleeding. The leader and his men had got him, though the mob tried to tear him away. There was a lamp-post just outside the shop. They fixed a noose clumsily around his neck, and he was drawn kicking and struggling for life into the air, while the frenzied mob screamed at him. I was mad myself. They had got my girl! What were they doing to her! I hadn't long to wait. A shrieking madwoman, the one with the dead baby, appeared at the window where I had seen my girl. She screamed that

they had got her and were treating her as she deserved. The people roared in response. 'Chuck her out,' they yelled. 'Chuck her out to us. We'll learn her!'

" 'There's two girls,' yelled someone, and this excited them the more. A diversion was created by the leader's gang bringing out the old woman and hanging her to the same post as her husband. She was insensible when they did it, and cannot have suffered much. But where were the girls?

There was a crash from the window above as the framework, glass and all burst outward. I heard a terrified scream and then something white, all streaked with red, hurtled through the air and fell on the pavement. It was one of the girls!"

It was a minute or two before Perkins could go on. Then he made an effort at self-control.

"You'd better hear it to the end. We could hear dreadful cries coming from the top window, even above the roar of the crowd. Then once more a tortured body was flung from the window. The mob rushed at the poor, quivering bodies where they lay twisted and broken on the ground. They flung them this way and that, kicking and clawing at them, and then hung the battered relices of humanity from another lamp-post. 'Food hoarders! Food hoarders!' they yelled, tearing great lumps of bread from the loaves, which had been thrown out of the house, and cramming them into their mouths. 'Food hoarders!' That was the cry from all sides. They were like raving maniacs.

"I was nearly sick with the horror of it all. Nobby was all shook up too. We were swung this way and that by the swirling mob, but we managed to get to our girls at last. We cursed those who were still aiming blows at the bodies of the poor girls, spinning round and round on the ropes from which they hung. We struck out wildly and in a fury. The tears were streaming down Nobby's cheeks as he fought, and I don't think he cared much what happened to him. The cowardly mob drew off a bit, and then I saw the man who had asked me if I was hungry pointing at us and howling to his fellows. 'Food hoarder!' he yelled, and the mob began to press in on us.

"I DON'T know how we got away. One moment we were fighting for our lives, and then we were suddenly free. I think it was another gang of starving hooligans, which made a rush for the shop in the hope of food, and so swept our enemies aside for a few seconds. I'd willingly have died fighting there and made those devils pay for what they did to my girl.

"But what was the use? They'll all die a horrible death by slow starvation before long. Though I'll own I didn't think of that. Instinct of self-preservation, that's what it was. When we found ourselves clear for a moment and then saw those fiends coming at us again, we took our chance and ran for it. We had clubs in our hands, though I can't remember where I got mine, and we struck viciously at anyone who tried to bar our way. The mob was on our heels, yelling 'Food hoarders!' but they were half starved and we managed to keep our lead and eventually outdistance the last of them. But the chase had taken us into a part of the town we didn't know, and when we could at last slow down to a walk and mingle with other people we were completely lost. Though it didn't take us long to find out by asking, as soon as we were sure of not being chased any longer. But it fair gave us the creeps to see the people wandering around helplessly. They could hardly keep their minds on anything, if you see what I mean; sort of dazed they were and half crazy with hunger. Decent folk mostly, but getting more and more desperate. The hooligans were getting the upper hand and grabbing any food there was for themselves.

"Nobby and I were still half mad ourselves, but we began to think more clearly after a bit. We didn't like the way some folk looked at us, and it soon dawned on us that we looked too well fed. People were either afraid of us, fearing we were hooligans who had managed to grab food somehow, or else they started at us with the suspicion that we were that most loathsome and hated of creatures, food hoarders. The rougher sort were openly hostile, and we were occasionally shadowed for a time by hungry-looking ruffians, who muttered angrily to each other.

"We made up our minds to try and get back here, without drawing attention to the laboratory. We realized what fools we had been to disobey orders and go out, and we were anxious to avoid bringing the consequences of our folly on you. You do undertsand that, don't you, sir?"

Jamieson patted the wounded man kindly on his shoulder. "Don't worry, laddie, we understand that. Ye're a decent chap."

"But we bungled it. Or rather we had cursed bad luck. We lay up in a conven-

ient hiding-place until dark, and then began to work our way back. It was easy enough in the dark. There were no street lamps, of course, but there was a moon shining through this damned yellow fog and we made good progress. Then we came to an open place. I think it was Vincent Square, where an open-air meeting was taking place. The square was lit by flares and a big bonfire, and an orator was haranguing the crowd. I don't know what it was all about and we didn't care to hear.

"I was all for turning back and working around through the dark side-streets, but Nobby was all in and looked like collapsing, and he gasped that we could safely go right ahead across the lighted square. He said no one would notice us, and anyway, if they did, we looked as wild and half-starved as the rest. He managed to work up a bit of a grin as he said this. Good old Nobby, he was always fond of a joke. There was sense in what he said, and it was quite true that we looked pretty well done in, and small wonder after what we had been through . . . and what we had seen.

"So we decided to make a bold push for it, straight across the lighted square. It looked easy enough, but we had to go quite close to the edge of the crowd, and we could hear what the speaker was saying. It was the sort of stuff you'd expect from desperate, starving men. He howled and ranted about food hoarders and dirty capitalists, while the mob roared back at him. They were too intent on listening to bother about us, and we slipped past them without difficulty. Then came our cursed bit of luck. Some toughs came running up to join the crowd and one of them bumped into Nobby. The brute turned on Nobby to snarl an oath at him, and in a flash I recognized him. It was the bloke who had asked me if I was hungry, when I answered 'No.'

"I tried to pull Nobby away before the brute recognized me, but it was too late. He let out a yell of 'Food hoarders!' pointing at us. We tried to slip off, but at this shout of 'Food hoarders!' dozens of people turned around. The savage brute who had recognized us—one of those who had hounded my girl to death—yelled to the crowd to smash us, and a menacing growl came from them in response. They had already been worked up to a murderous pitch by the orator, and their empty bellies did the rest. They came at us with a rush, and we turned and fled. But not before I had brought my club down on the bullet head of that brute. His skull smashed like an egg-shell and then he dropped down dead.

"IT WAS like hell. The square lit up by the flickering light of flares and those shrieking demons coming at us with savage cries yelling murder—aye, and worse than murder! I don't rightly remember what followed. Nobby and I must have fought our way clear, for presently we were running desperately for our lives in a direct line for home. Nobby grasped that he couldn't keep it up, and I was nearly done too. I remember we were intercepted once by a gang from a side-street; but we smashed a way through with our clubs. Within sight of safety Nobby went down, and I was some way ahead before I realized what had happened. They were on him like a pack of wolves! Nobby, the best of pals. I wish I was gone, too, gone fighting those devils and smashing their ugly faces for what they did to my girl . . . and Nobby. He's with her now, and I'm here, a damned coward. . . . They tore her, those she-devils, and I didn't die with her. . Mary, lass, I would have died; you know that, don't you? . . . Nobby will tell you. . . ."

He broke down, sobbing and crying helplessly, while the others stared at one another horror-struck. Murgatroyd was as white as the wretched man in bed, who was being attended to by the doctor.

"Let him be," he said, with his hand on the man's pulse. "He has had one shock after another and is suffering from exhaustion. This paroxysm will help to discharge his pent-up emotion. He'll be all right physically in a day or two."

"Physically?" muttered Murgatroyd. "But what about mentally?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "Aren't we all changed a bit these days? Perkins enjoyed smashing that brute's skull. What about us? What about the rest of the men, when they hear this story? Perhaps we shall retain something of the twentieth century; but the world is slipping back to paleolithic times—or maybe farther. Like hell—that's what Perkins said. We shan't escape the effects of all this."

In their hearts they knew that the doctor was right. Something of the savage had stirred within them at the bare recital of Perkins' story. How would they react when they, too, met those brutes face to face? For of that there was no doubt. The existence of their stronghold had been given away by the imprudence of Perkins and Nobby Clark. It would not be long before

an infuriated mob surrounded them in their frantic search for food.

There came a rumbling crash which caused the building to tremble. Jamieson hastily glanced out of the window of the office which gave a view over their little domain.

"It's all right," he said. "It's the big water tower. We were expecting it to go any time. The water was emptied out long ago and an area was left clear in case it collapsed, which it was sure to do sooner or later."

But it was soon evident that something was wrong. Shouts were heard and a whistle was blown shrilly. Hurried footsteps sounded on the stairs, and the door burst open to admit Hanley, the works manager.

"Mr. Jamieson, can you come at once?"

"Why, what's happened?"

"The old water tower! It's gone!"

"Aye. It hadn't escaped my notice. What of it?"

"No one is hurt. It's not that. But a bit of the outer wall has been smashed by the fall. There's a crowd outside. We don't like the look of them."

Jamieson gave an exclamation. "I see. I'll come at once."

"What is it?" asked Murgatroyd, who had become absorbed in a sheet of calculations he had found on his desk, placed there by his brilliant young assistant, Thompson.

Jamieson briefly explained and Murgatroyd nodded.

"It's your affair. I must get on with our investigations. Don't go exposing yourself too much, you old ruffian. I believe you are thoroughly enjoying the prospect of a fight."

A confused shouting from outside broke in upon their agitated words, and Hanley ran out followed by Jamieson.

MURGATROYD sighed deeply and returned to his calculations. He had the utmost confidence in Jamieson, to whom he had handed over the welfare of their little community, and the stocky Scot, completely recovered from the shock he had received when his beloved Severn Bridge fell, had entered on his new duties with energy and enthusiasm. The scientist was thereby freed from all worry about details, and his mind was free to pursue the elusive problem of finding a cure for the frightful disease which had attacked iron and steel.

A minor success had been scored almost at once. The professor had been experimenting for some months on the effect of treating ferrous metals in a molten state with high frequency electric induction at high potential. His apparatus had been daringly constructed and the terrific voltage used had been attended with considerable risk. The insulated chamber at the laboratory crackled with miniature electric storms, fizzing with violent light and sudden leaping ribbons of white-hot discharge, in the midst of which the professor, and his devoted helpers, moved like strange futurist monsters, fantastically hooded and gloved as a protection against the elemental blast of uncurbed force.

Now these tentative investigations had borne fruit. With half-incredulous delight, Murgatroyd found that metals treated in this fashion were to some extent immune from disintegration for a short time. It was the first ray of hope and the process was immediately applied to a number of articles of essential need. The metals so treated were not entirely immune, but they could be relied upon to last for a few months so that, by means of a careful rotation of renewals, certain essential machines could be kept in use. Further, a carefully compiled selection of tools and implements could be sent weekly to Bradley Parva. These articles ranged from pins and needles to ploughshares, and they would enable Sylvanus Dale to support a larger population in his little colony than would otherwise have been possible.

But the major problem remained to be solved. No partial immunity could possibly satisfy the needs of the entire human race and prevent the world from reverting permanently to the most primitive conditions. Murgatroyd resolutely put from him the fear of this ultimate disaster, which assailed him at times. There must be a solution to the problem and they must find it!

There was a knock at the door and Thompson came in. Murgatroyd greeted him with a quick smile. He liked this strange, dark youngster.

"Come in, Tommy. There's going to be trouble outside, I think. Jamieson has just gone to see about it. At any rate, it leaves us free to get on with our work."

Thompson went across to the window and looked out, fingering the blind cord.

"I would be no good out there."

"Your place is in here, my boy."

"I know. . . . But I wish I was stronger!"

"Nonsense! You are as fit as a fiddle."

"Oh, yes, I'm healthy enough. But look at me! What use would I be in a scrap?"

"You don't need to be."

There was silence for a short time. Murgatroyd was occupied with a calculation sheet. Then Thompson, who was still at the window staring out into vacancy, suddenly turned inward.

"But suppose we fail!"

Murgatroyd looked up in surprise at the intense tones of his assistant.

"We shall not fail," he answered quietly.

"We must face it. It's a possibility. Suppose we do fail. What then?"

"Why contemplate such a thing? Come, let us get to work."

Thompson's sensitive nostrils quivered and his delicate lips trembled.

"It's all very well to talk," he blurted out, "but I repeat, what if we fail?"

MURGATROYD leaned back in his chair, puzzled by the lad's obvious emotion. "What then? Why, I suppose we would cut our way to Bradley Parva and join Dale; we are besieged now, you know. Perhaps I should say . they will cut their way out. . I am rather too old for hand-to-hand fighting. But why trouble about that? We can face that like men, if it comes."

"That's what I mean. Hand-to-hand fighting! Look at me! Look at me! What use would I be at that? I would never reach Bradley Parva either. Oh, yes, we can face it for ourselves. But what of others?"

"I know what you mean, but we must steel ourselves against thinking of others. The human race depends on our efforts!"

"I suppose so," answered Thompson listlessly. He turned again to the window, controlling himself with an obvious effort. "What do the men think? Haven't they mothers, sisters, wives sweethearts out there?"

"As far as possible they are being cared for at Bradley Parva."

"It's trying them too high. They'll desert—those that are strong enough."

"In a short time, the most horrible punishment we could inflict will be to put a man outside."

There came a sudden outburst of shouts and the roar of a distant mob through the window. A whistle shrilled and another roar answered it. A growing clamor had accompanied their conversation for some time, but it was now swelling to a more menacing sound.

"It sounds like trouble. Jamieson is there and will deal with it. Come now, let us get to work. You have read my note on your suggestions about the range of tungsten alloys. Will you see Turnbull about raising the critical pressure and temperature? He'll want a few days to prepare. Then we can. ."

A tremendous shout shook the windows. Thompson looked up uneasily.

"Shall I go and see what is up, sir?"

"No," replied Murgatroyd curtly, "Jamieson is on the spot. As I was saying, we can then. . ."

And he went on with a masterly survey of their progress so far and the lines on which further investigations should proceed. Thompson was soon absorbed in the sheer fascination of his discourse, and the two men bent their heads over their calculations, oblivious of all else. The clamor outside died down to a dull murmur, rising and falling like the sound of the sea, but the two scientists no longer paid any attention to it. They were in a world of their own, forgetful of everything but the problem they had set themselves to solve.

Murgatroyd would jot down a set of formulae, and Thompson with quick understanding manipulated his slide rule in and out, working out the intricate calculations with swift accuracy. Sometimes the desired computation was more involved and a compact calculating machine was brought into use. The long fingers of the chief assistant, thin and nervous as those of an artist, played swiftly over the keys of the whirring, clicking machine for a few seconds and then his precise voice read out the result from its revolving dials.

The empty columns of sheet after sheet were filled steadily with figures, crystallizing out the inspired assumptions of Murgatroyd's brain, working at high pressure in the tremendous fight against time. They had a year, and only a year! If their provisions gave out before the problem was solved. . But nothing of these forebodings entered their heads as they quickly planned their campaign.

But they were not to work undisturbed for long that morning. The door opened to admit Jamieson, with the light of combat in his sparkling eyes. Both men looked up with rather an absent look; their problem had removed them from the workaday world for a time.

"Eh, laddie, it was a grand fight while it lasted, which wasn't for long." There was almost a note of regret in his voice.

"What happened?"

"Oh, nothing very serious. Not yet.

There was an ugly rush or two at the place where the wall is broken. Eh, but your men are bonny fighters!"

"I believe you are absolutely enjoying yourself!"

"I'll not be denying it—since I heard what Perkins had to tell. But it's likely to be serious. They've got leaders outside. There's no doubt about it, we are properly besieged; and there's going to be a regular attack on us, unless. ."

"Unless what?"

"It's about that I want to see you. They've got leaders, and they want to send a deputation to you under a white flag. The rascals! I said I'd see you."

"A deputation! What can they want? Tell them we want no communication with them."

"There's only one thing they want. They've been howling 'food hoarders' at us for the last hour. You'd better see them and tell them the plain truth."

"If they want us to surrender our supplies, we must just defy them. Poor devils! What would be the use? Our supplies would last them for a day or two, and then things would be as bad as ever."

"That's so."

"It is imperative for us to survive. They'll threaten and bluster, but no terms are possible. But perhaps you are right; I'd better see them."

Jamieson departed to send a message to the enemy that they could send in three men, and no more, to interview Professor Murgatroyd.

"Losh save us," he muttered to himself as he went, "I'm calling them the enemy again. Our own flesh and blood!"

CHAPTER VII

THE ATTACK ON THE LABORATORY

MURGATROYD stood up to receive the deputation, and he greeted them stiffly. The three deputies were led by Tring; he looked a decent sort, who might have been a works manager or chartered accountant before the trouble came. With him were Anderson, whose puffy cheeks, now sadly shrunken, betokened that vague something in the city that covered the operations of the business parasite, agent, broker, or what-not, and Buddy Jones, the famous, or rather infamous, firebrand and agitator. They came in, Tring with a courteous bow to Murgatroyd, Anderson with a cunning and furtive look around the room, and Jones with a defiant stare and upward toss of his scrubby chin. All three looked nerve-racked and starved, and they were sadly unkempt, although Tring had made an effort to retain something of his normal decency.

"Please be seated, gentlemen," murmured the head of the laboratory, and the three men subsided into their allotted chairs amid a silence which was only broken by the distant roar of the crowd outside. "Will one of you please open the discussion?"

"I will, curse you. I've come to tell you what I think of you, you blasted food hoarders." So spoke Jones with a rasp in his voice.

"Just keep a civil tongue in your head," snapped Jamieson.

"And who the hell may you be?"

Tring tried to restrain his fiery colleague. "There, there, Mr. Jones, there's nothing to be gained by violence."

"Violence! Why not? I'd like to try a little violence. I'm getting a bit tired of your soft soap, Tring."

Anderson clicked his tongue. "Let the man speak, Jones. You know what we agreed upon." His shifty eyes slid from side to side, uneasy and cunning, while he fiddled with a pencil and paper on the table in front of him.

Jones sat back, muttering under his breath. Murgatroyd turned to Tring.

"Go on."

Tring leaned forward on the table with his fingers entwined, staring eagerly at the aged professor.

"We have come to ask you, to beg you, to join with us and so help to mitigate this terrible catastrophe."

Murgatroyd did not reply, and after a pause Tring went on with a note of desperation in his voice.

"Food is . . running short. Railways, motors, and ships are no longer reliable. We must ration ourselves until this trouble passes."

"Don't think we're helpless," broke in Jones. "We've requisitioned supplies by canal. The wooden barges are coming along crammed with food for the workers."

"Ah! We mustn't forget that," exclaimed Anderson with an oily smile. "A most important point."

Tring showed signs of impatience. "I don't think we shall deceive either Mr. Jamieson or Professor Murgatroyd. The point I want to make, Professor, is that we are taking all steps possible to tide over until this trouble passes."

"Will it pass, Mr. Tring?"

"God knows!" A haggard, hunted look came into his eye. "If it doesn't. . ."

"Of course it will," broke in Jones. "Who's ever heard of such a thing? It may be some damned capitalist dodge."

"For a time," Tring went on, "we are an isolated community, and we have taken drastic measures. We have formed a food rationing committee and we have commandeered all supplies—all, that is, except yours."

"Under what authority do you act?"

"The authority of the people, the workers," bawled Jones. "We are organized to deal with those who oppose us, don't let there be any mistake about that. ."

"The usual dictatorship?"

"Ah! The dictatorship of the proletariat! You needn't worry about our authority, and don't you try to oppose us. If you do, you'll find out your mistake, you damned food hoarder."

Murgatroyd ignored this outburst and turned to Tring. "Well?" he asked.

"Mr. Jones—"

"Buddy Jones, if you please."

"Buddy Jones has put, in crude fashion, the actual state of affairs. The ordinary forms of government have collapsed with the general collapse of the means of communication and the dissolution of the ordinary means of enforcing law and order. . ."

"Meaning that there ain't any more police, or soldiers, or damned specials, or anybody in power except us." Buddy Jones leaned back, expanding his chest in satisfaction at this statement.

"People have already collapsed in the streets from starvation. It is terrible beyond words." Tring leaned forward to emphasize his words. "Professor Murgatroyd, we have heard that you have exceptionally large supplies. Is that true?"

"I refuse to answer."

"Then we must assume the answer to be in the affirmative."

"As you please."

"I earnestly beg you to give up your supplies for the common good."

"And if I refuse?"

Tring held up one hand impressively. "Listen! Listen to the angry roaring of the people! The crowd without is angry; you can hear them for yourselves. We cannot entirely restrain them."

"And we don't want to restrain them, you damned swine! There were a dozen hoarders hanged yesterday. Do you hear?" yelled Buddy Jones.

TRING smiled grimly. "You hear, Professor? The authentic Voice of the People! You asked me what would happen if you refuse to give up your supplies. The answer is this. We shall take them by force, and I cannot be answerable for the consequences to yourself and your people. Is that plain?"

"Don't mince your words, Tring," Jones said. He turned to the professor. "If you want it any plainer, you damned hoarder, you'll be hanged, or I dare say flogged to death, unless you are lucky enough to be killed in the fighting."

"We should resist to the utmost any attempt to force a way into the laboratory. Our work is vital for the human race. We ought to be encouraged and protected, not threatened with violence."

"No doubt that could be arranged, if you will only throw in your lot with us. We must all stick together in these times."

"That's what I say," broke in Anderson eagerly. "Why can't we get together and do what is best for all of us? There's an ugly mob outside, Professor, and I don't like the look of them, to tell the truth. We are supposed to be their leaders, but how can we control them? When they are starving, it will be each man for himself."

His puffy cheeks paled with fear and his eyes grew desperate.

"Each man for himself! That's what I am afraid of. Now, Professor, if you and I"—his furtive eyes swung round unhappily to the agitator—"and, of course, Mr. Jones—our old friend Buddy Jones, ha! ha!—if we three could confer together. . ." Under the baleful glare of his old friend, Buddy Jones, the wretched Anderson wilted and wriggled miserably. "I mean that if my well-known business capacity were allied to. I could be invaluable. Professor, you take my meaning, I'm sure. With Buddy Jones's help, of course; we couldn't get on without Buddy Jones. You see what I mean, don't you, Buddy my boy, eh? Ha! ha! We must stick together with the professor, mustn't we? "

His voice trailed away into silence, his eyes fixed on those of Jones, who was glaring at him like a tiger. With a short laugh, Jones turned away from the miserable man, all the remnants of color drained from his unhealthily mottled cheeks, and addressed himself to the others.

"I'll show them who is leader," he snarled malevolently. "You leave them to me. We'll soon put a stop to this capitalistic hoarding and starving of the workers.

Well, Murgatroyd, what's your answer?"

Murgatroyd continued to ignore the agitator and spoke to Tring.

"Is it true? Is the mob starving already?"

"They're going short. There's enough food to go round, if you will come in with us."

"Enough to go round? Is there?"

A despairing look came into Tring's eyes. "Yes! If only you'll be reasonable."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't fence with me! Are you going to give up your supplies or not?"

"I am not!"

For a moment silence followed this defiance. Then Tring and Jones leaped to their feet, and a chair fell over backward with a crash. Anderson cowered behind the table, burying his face in his shaking hands.

"You must!" shrieked Tring. "It's starvation for us all if you don't. I tell you there is enough! My God, there must be enough! We can't all starve! Murgatroyd, I beg you, I implore you to consider what you are doing. ."

His desperate entreaties were rudely interrupted by Jones. Shouting, "You damned swine! Murderer! Cowardly murderer!" he made a rush at Murgatroyd, but recoiled at the sight of Jamieson's men, who moved threateningly toward him and hustled him to one side.

Anderson took advantage of this move to stagger to his feet and fling himself on his knees in front of Murgatroyd.

"Take me in with you!" he screamed. "Take me in! I can't face it! They'll tear us like wild animals! I'm starving. Have mercy on me! I'll do anything you tell me, only don't turn me out." Tears streamed down his blotched face as he howled to be taken into the safe refuge of the laboratory. "Take me in!" he shrieked again and again. "Take me in! Oh, my God, have mercy on me!"

Jones burst from his guards and hurled himself on the groveling wretch. "Take that, you blasted little rat!" He rained savage blows on Anderson, who fell sideways, gasping and sobbing. Jamieson's men surrounded him again and held him back, but the furious man broke loose. "Let me go, damn you! Listen to me, you men. You've sold yourselves to a damned food hoarder. I can pay you twice. ."

He got no farther, for Jamieson caught him a good clean blow on the point of the chin and he went down as if he had been pole-axed.

Murgatroyd sat white-faced and shaken by this violent scene. A silence fell on them all, broken only by the whimpering of the abject Anderson, who still cowered on the floor, muttering whispered entreaties not to be turned out. Jamieson nursed his bruised knuckles and kept a watch on the prostrate form of Buddy Jones, now stirring slowly to uneasy life. It was Tring who broke the awkward silence. After his semi-hysterical outburst, he had regained control of himself and he stood tight-lipped and defiant, glowering on them all.

"Have you spoken your last word, Professor?"

Murgatroyd bowed his head in silence.

"Very well. . . . I have warned you. For myself, I think it is finished. The violence of the mob will break loose when I tell them your answer. I dare say you can defend yourselves against the half-starved people. But, as to myself, I have no illusions. It is Buddy Jones and his like who will get control. . . . I am going to my death, either now at the hands of the mob, or later from slow starvation." He smiled a wry smile and shrugged his shoulders. "I am a dying man. Dying men sometimes see things more clearly than others. We might have won through, if we had shared and shared alike. You have chosen otherwise. Professor Murgatroyd, you are an incarnate devil, a brute, a fiend unfit to live. I have no more to say to you. I fling in your face a dying man's curse."

FOR a moment he faced the aged figure of the scientist, sitting huddled in his chair. Then he turned on his heel and strode to the door. Jamieson flashed a look of admiration at him as he went.

"Hanley, see Mr. Tring is properly escorted out. And just throw these two after him, will ye?"

The inert form of Buddy Jones was lifted unceremoniously and unkindly bundled out. Anderson was dragged after him, screaming with terror. His despairing shrieks died away in the distance.

Jamieson shut the door behind the departing throng and turned to where Murgatroyd sat.

"Eh, yon Tring is a brave man. A pity we could not have him in with us. I hope he wins through."

His friend did not reply at once. He sat at the table where he had received the deputation, twisting his fingers together, his face drawn and lined.

"This shakes me," he whispered. "I

thought I had steeled myself against what was to come. But this is terrible, unbearable."

"Ye're not forgetting what they did to Perkins and Nobby Clark?"

"It is all horrible, horrible. But I am going on. My brain tells me I am right. If we go down, then the last hope for the world perishes. My brain is clear and it tells me to go on."

"And that great soft heart, that ye try to hide from everyone, what does that tell ye?"

For answer the aged professor bowed his head on his hands and groaned helplessly. A sob shook his frame convulsively and Jamieson went quickly to his side.

"There, there, laddie," he cried soothingly, as though to a child, clapping his hand on the overwrought man's shoulder, "never fear. Of course you are right; your friends, and that's all of us, are with ye."

"Old friend, I'm not a hard man really. Am I? Am I?"

Jamieson did not reply but continued to pat his friend's shoulder.

"They were decent fellows really, all three of them. Who am I to condemn them to death?"

"Whist, laddie, ye're no' condemning them."

"I know, but it seemed so horrible to refuse. Yet if I gave up everything it would only feed a few thousands for a short time, and then it would be as bad as ever."

"That's so."

"We have got to survive. My plans are made and I shall stick to them, whatever happens."

"That's the spirit!"

"What do you think will happen?"

Jamieson went across to the window, flinging it up. A mighty shout from the direction of the main gate was borne in to them by the heavy, fog-laden air, followed by a confused babel of voices.

"I'm thinking Tring will be telling them what a hard-hearted auld deevil ye are. Just listen to that!"

A savage roar stunned them with its brutal ferocity. As though a menagerie of wild beasts had broken loose. Another cry of fury rent the heavy air; then a sudden lull in which a frenzied voice could be heard haranguing the mob, punctuated by answering cries of increasing savagery. Then came a horrid scream, ripping across the diapason roaring of the hungry beasts. Scream upon scream, till Murgatroyd clapped his hands over his ears, to shut out the dreadful sound of a human being, tortured and dying amid terrible anguish.

"What is it?"

White-faced, Jamieson replied. "It sounds like Anderson. Maybe Jones has told them. Losh save us, and give him a quick death!"

The screams died down into hoarse cries drowned by the exultant shouts of satiated vengeance. The shouts merged into a lower-pitched growling, which in turn changed to a continuous murmur. A murmur betokening a business-like activity. Jamieson peered out of the window and then withdrew his head.

"I'm thinking there will be a wee bit of a fight before long. Aweel, we're ready."

Murgatroyd staggered to his feet and with an effort squared his shoulders. "Devils!" he muttered. "Our own people! To think it should have come to this!"

"Keep a stout heart, laddie. We'll keep them out. But I had better be going along. The fight will be beginning soon, and I don't want to miss a whack at those devils. Ye'll be busy with your experiments maybe? Aye, I thought so. Weel, good luck."

At the door he met Thompson, hurrying in.

A HEAP of rubble from the shattered brick wall and a twisted tangle of girders marked the site of an ugly breach in their defenses. Jamieson put his men to working hard at clearing away the debris, with a view to the reconstruction of the wall. But unfortunately the gap had exposed them to the view of the angry mob outside. For the present the rabble were content to confine themselves to the shouting of insults and abuse, and occasionally to heaving a brickbat from a safe distance. Twice Jamieson ordered his men, who were armed with formidable clubs, to charge, and there was a wild stampede for safety round the corner.

"What do you think, Hanley? Shall we throw up an earthwork and man it with a strong body? Then we could build a curtain wall farther back in safety. I don't like the look of things at all. The devils are growing bolder. I doubt if Tring and that poor creature Anderson can hold them, if they're still alive. Buddy Jones and his gang will get control and then there will be merry Hades."

"You're right, Mr. Jamieson. We can't hope to rebuild the wall in time on its old site. Just listen to that!"

A frantic clamor rent the air, followed by a comparative silence.

"What are they up to now?"

They were not left in doubt for long. There was a sudden scurry in the roadway outside the breach, and a party of the enemy appeared, running boldly toward the repairing party. They seemed to be carrying long sticks.

"What on airth are the deevils .?"

One of the masons rose screaming to his feet, plucking at an arrow which transfixed him. He staggered wildly to and fro, tugging frantically at the tormenting shaft, till a gush of blood from his mouth choked his cries and he fell writhing to the ground.

"Bows and arrows! Quick, Hanley, bring up the reserve. This is serious."

The attackers raised a shout, and a straggling volley of arrows whistled through the air. If they had followed up their surprise with a resolute charge, things might have gone badly for the defenders. But they were content for the time to continue sniping the working party, who were driven to taking cover as best they could. Jamieson ordered them to withdraw, and they did so in good order, followed by yells of triumph from without.

For the moment no attack followed this success, but Jamieson saw that they would not be left unmolested for long. A mob leader was delivering a violent harangue at the end of the street, working the gang of toughs up to the attacking pitch. There was no time to be lost, and under the direction of Hanley the men set to work to erect a rough breastwork of hastily piled brickbats.

As soon as the men were fully employed, Hanley spoke urgently to Jamieson.

"It'll never do, sir. They've got better weapons than we have, for the time being. Bows and arrows in the twentieth century! We ought to have foreseen that."

"Aye, we ought."

"We must make a weapon to go one better. But it'll take time."

"Cross-bows of steel, eh?"

"That's what I've been thinking."

"Can we rely on the steel?"

"Not for long. But the professor's process will ensure their lasting for a time. We must have a carefully worked out program of renewals, like all our other tools."

"True, but it will interfere with our research duties."

"That can't be helped. Survival comes first!"

The two men quickly discussed details, and Hanley made a rough sketch of a cross-bow for the benefit of the foreman.

"I've seen them things in the museum," he said. "It won't be difficult to knock up a dozen sets by tomorrow, if we work all night."

They would be murderous weapons when completed, and would undoubtedly give the defenders superiority in armaments, but until then they were in grave danger.

"That fellow Buddy Jones is no fool, sir. I've met him. He's a fanatic, but as clever as a cartload of monkeys. He'll guess that we shall set to work to make weapons, and he'll try to rush us before we are ready. A cursed bit of luck, having our wall knocked down like that; but for that we could have sat tight and laughed at them all."

JAMIESON glanced uneasily at the slender barricade on which they would have to rely for defense against the coming attack. The men worked rapidly, for they knew only too well that small mercy would be given them by the howling savages without. Even now the clamor was rising again in a terrifying crescendo.

The attack commenced with a rapid discharge of volleys of arrows, which did little damage. A long range shot whistled uncomfortably close to Jamieson and his staff, who were posted in a doorway at the top of a flight of stone steps. Hanley suggested withdrawal to an upper window, but Jamieson would not hear of it.

"We must be on the spot in case of need. This hand-to-hand fighting is tricky business, and a few seconds one way or another may make all the difference between success or defeat. By Jove! Here they come now!"

Yelling encouragement to one another, the attackers swarmed out of a side-street and made a dash at the half-completed barricade. They were armed with clubs, sharpened poles, and broken bottles; some carried bags of stones, which were showered on the defenders in order to force them to cower under cover, while the main body rushed the defenses. The attack was well conceived and boldly carried out, and it came within an ace of success. Jamieson's men were stout fighters and not by any means lacking in courage; but they were as yet inexperienced in the methods of warfare of the Stone Age, though several of them had served in military capacities.

They were taken by surprise by the savagery of the determined rush of the hunger-maddened mob, and before they knew where they were, the frenzied rabble

was among them, battering down their resistance and howling with premature triumph. A dozen men went down in the first onset, and the attackers swept over the rough barricades, while a supporting party, led by Buddy Jones in person, came tearing along the street to complete the defeat of the defenders.

For a moment things looked ugly, but Jamieson had posted a strong posse of men in a flank position. In response to a shrill whistle these men charged lustily, taking the attackers by surprise in their flank. A brisk mêlée ensued, and the first line of attack fell back, just as Buddy Jones and his men arrived on the scene. But the superiority in numbers of the assaulting party was momentarily a disadvantage to them, for there was such a congestion in the breach that the enemy could not make effective use of their primitive arms. On the other hand the defenders were now able to reform in a disciplined line, and they did terrible execution with their lustily plied weapons. Jamieson breathed more freely as the situation became less dangerous. The atack was held!

Buddy Jones quickly grasped the new situation. At a signal from him the shower of arrows recommenced, but this time they were fired at long range over the heads of the combatants on and around the barricade. He sprang to a commanding position on a wall and shouted to his followers to fall back. Only too willingly they disentangled themselves from the fight and retreated down the street, snarling curses over their shoulders as they ran. Jamieson's men sprang onto the barricade and gave chase, cutting down a few wounded stragglers who were limping painfully away. Jamieson whistled shrilly to them to return, but a small party incautiously carried the pursuit too far for safety.

Buddy Jones had foreseen this, and had remained concealed in the mouth of an alley, as the retreat and pursuit raged past him. Six of the laboratory force who had outdistanced the rest in the pursuit suddenly found themselves confronted by an overwhelmingly superior party of the enemy emerging from the alley. They gave a shout of alarm, and their friends turned to their aid. But it was all over in a flash; the six men were rushed and overpowered, and, almost before anyone realized what was happening, the unfortunate men were captured and dragged off, screaming for help.

"Good God, sir!" cried Hanley. "We can't leave them in the hands of those devils. Turn out the whole force! We must get them back at all costs."

"Steady, laddie! It's bad. As bad as it can be. But we can't possibly go slambanging about the streets of the city looking for the poor lads."

"But—but what will happen to them?"

Jamieson did not reply. What was there to be said?

THE attackers had lost five killed and a number of wounded, who had been dragged off by their fellows in the retreat. The dead men were buried unceremoniously. One of them was still alive when picked up, and he rallied slightly just before he died. Jamieson tried to question him, but he only spat curses and died reviling his captors to the last.

"Eh, but it's terrible how one week's starvation has turned men into savage beasts. It's unnatural! I believe this yellow fog is corroding men's souls as well as metals. It's fair uncanny; we seem to be slipping back into the dark ages. Would we be as bad, if ever we come to starving and fighting for a living?"

"We are all right now," Hanley said. "The attack has been beaten off, and the wall will be quickly repaired."

"Oh, aye. Nae doubt."

"What's the trouble, sir? You don't sound too confident."

"It's those six men they've captured. Six hostages. Buddy Jones is not likely to overlook the advantage that gives him."

"Yes, it's a pity he scored that point. But they say they will be surrendered for a payment of supplies."

"Ye think so? Weel, I hope you're right."

There was no further sign of the enemy for several hours. An unearthly stillness brooded over the ruined city, and it almost seemed as if the attackers had withdrawn altogether to another district.

"I don't like it," Jamieson said to Murgatroyd over the tea-cups. "I should have expected a renewal of the attack before now. Our defenses are growing stronger every minute. Buddy Jones isn't the sort to admit defeat so easily."

"Perhaps they've found supplies elsewhere. A warehouse that had somehow been overlooked. It isn't likely, I admit. Every corner must have been ransacked by now. I wish that the fear of a renewal of the attack was our only worry."

Hanley knocked at the door and came in. "There's a party of men visible down

the road about a hundred yards from the main gate. They are digging holes in the road."

"Digging holes? What for?"

"I couldn't say, sir. Will you come and look?"

While they were watching, a number of men appeared staggering under the burden of a stout post which they set upright in one of the holes. Then another was placed in position and the loose earth was packed tightly round it, and so on until six stout stakes had been fixed firmly in the roadway.

"The devils," muttered Jamieson.

"What is it, sir?" asked Hanley.

There was no need to reply. Before their horror-struck gaze, the six prisoners were dragged forward and bound securely to the stakes. Then Buddy Jones and three men were seen advancing under a white flag. They marched boldly up to the main gate, and Buddy Jones came forward with a leer.

"Hi! You damned food hoarders," he shouted, "send that old fool of a professor to talk to me."

Jamieson opened the wicket-gate cautiously and stepped out.

"Well, Jones, what do you want?"

"Ah! That's better. You're still alive, are you? But it's Mr. Bloody Murgatroyd I want, so you can go back."

"Say what you want to say as quickly as you can, and I'll take the message to him. And don't be foul-mouthed over it. Now then!"

Buddy Jones grinned maliciously. "Are you going to do what I say? Send out that old fool!"

"I've already told you I will take your message."

Buddy Jones turned toward the end of the street and gave a shrill whistle. There was an answering growl from the group standing round the prisoners, and a rough-looking man went quickly to one of them and did something. There came a frightful scream from the unfortunate victim, greeted with a maniacal howl of laughter from the mob.

"Ah-h-h-h!" shrieked the victim, writhing as far as his bonds would let him. "Stop him! Don't let him do it! Help! Help!"

There was a roar of fury from the men inside who were watching this scene. They hurled curses at Jones, who stood unmoved in the road.

"That's right," he sneered. "Shout till your guts burst, if you like. It's all you can do. We're ready for you, if you try a rescue. We could do with a few more prisoners."

MURGATROYD strode quickly forward to Jamieson's side.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Oh, so you've come," sniggered Jones. "I thought you wouldn't be too proud to speak to me for long. Well, are you ready to talk, or must I whistle to my friend again?"

"You devil!"

"No names, please. You'd better keep a civil tongue in your head. Now listen to me, Murgatroyd. You hand over all your supplies. Do you hear?"

"I gave you my answer to that demand. I refuse!"

Jones turned round and raised his hand.

"Stop!" cried the aged professor, in an agony of fear for the unfortunate men tied to the stake.

"Ah ha!" chuckled Buddy Jones. "So you are beginning to see reason."

"I must think this over, you infernal brute!"

"That's right, you think it over. I want all your supplies; and all your men, damned swine and swindlers, must be handed over to us to deal with. My men are very anxious to have a little talk with them. They want to try and convince them they have taken the wrong side."

He said this with an air of such ferocity, that an audible growl of rage broke from the listening men. No mercy would be given to any man surrendered to those ravening monsters, driven mad by hunger and fear!

"And listen to this. If you don't surrender, those six men will be tortured and then burned alive."

Cries of fury again greeted this cold-blooded announcement, but Buddy Jones remained unmoved.

"It's us or you," he shouted, "and I don't mean it to be us. You tried to condemn us to starvation, and now it's our turn. Come on, what's your answer?"

"Temporize with the brute," whispered Jamieson fiercely to his companion. "I think I have a plan."

Murgatroyd turned sourly to the leering agitator. "You refused to talk until I came. Well, I will negotiate with Tring, not with you."

Buddy Jones laughed, throwing back his head and exposing his dog teeth in a savage snarl. "Tring! Ha! He's dead! He died rather suddenly. Sad, isn't it?"

"Well, send Anderson to me."

"Anderson's dead too," was the curt answer to this.

Murgatroyd's features worked painfully as he assimilated these two callous announcements.

"What, precisely, are your demands?" he asked.

"I've told you already. Complete surrender."

"What about the men?"

"They must join us. Otherwise. ." He threw back his head and laughed again.

"What about me?"

Buddy Jones leered cunningly at him. "I'll give you a safe conduct to wherever you want to go. We've no use for silly old fools and, if you surrender your supplies, you won't be worth hanging."

Murgatroyd turned to Jamieson. "What are we to do?" he asked in despair. "We can't abandon those poor fellows to their fate."

"Tell him you will give him an answer tomorrow morning. Say you wish to consult the men."

"Hurry up," shouted Buddy Jones. "I can't stand waiting here all day. We're hungry."

"I'm afraid you are too strong for us. But I must have time to consult with my men. They may not be prepared to surrender. They may not trust you. I cannot speak for them at the moment. I will give you an answer at midnight. I cannot say any more."

The fury died out of Buddy Jones's eyes. He stared hard at Murgatroyd, trying to read his mind, but the aged scientist allowed his gaze to fall dejectedly under the fierce scrutiny of the mob leader. His obvious frailty stirred no pity in the agitator's mind, but rather gave him a sense of strength and superiority. He seemed content with his scrutiny, and a self-satisfied expression came over his brutal face.

"Come now, Murgatroyd, that's better. You'll be all right, I promise you that. I'm not such a bad chap, and perhaps I spoke too sharply. But we're hungry, and hungry men are not patient. But don't you and that fellow Jamieson get up to any tricks. Complete surrender at midnight, or else we shall burn your friends alive. And not quickly, either. We'll do it nice and slowly, so that you will be able to hear them screaming for hours." And with a return to his savage manner he laughed ferociously and departed with his party.

There was a low growl from the defenders as he went, and there was a quick movement toward Jamieson directly he reentered the main gate. They demanded an instant sally to the rescue of their fellows bound to the stake and awaiting a dreadful end.

"Steady, lads, we'll get them back. We've got till midnight. Dinna fash yerselves."

THE rugged Scot was just the man to steady the little garrison. He made them a neat speech, and the murmurs soon died down on his promise that a rescue would be attempted before midnight. It all depended, he said, on superiority of armaments. In the few hours given to them they must get the cross-bows made. Then they would spring a surprise on the enemy and bring the six men triumphantly back. There was a shout of approval at this, and the men settled down to wait the delivery of the primitive and hastily constructed weapons of a bygone age.

Hanley and Jamieson hastened to the workshops, where they found that rapid progress was being made. By a stroke of luck supplies of treated steel were available of just the sizes required. The steel was freshly made, and it would last for a week or so, by which time further supplies would be made ready. The simple mechanism of the weapons was already well advanced, and a few hours would see the completion of a dozen cross-bows. At short range they would be murderous weapons.

"Ammunition?" asked Jamieson, and Hanley showed him a thin steel shaft pointed at one end.

"It's another stroke of luck. We had this section of treated steel in stock ready for dispatch to Bradley Parva. We have only to cut it into lengths and sharpen one end, and there you are. We shall have hundreds ready in an hour or two."

Darkness fell, and the glare of lights in the workshop showed up the humming activity of the willing workers. Furnaces shone redly here and there, while the clang of hammers on anvils rang cheerfully on all sides. One of the weapons was nearly ready, with the exception of the trigger, by nine o'clock, and they tried the effect of firing one of the steel shafts at a stout wooden plank. There was a vibrant twang as the broad spring was released, the shining steel quarrel flew whistling through the air, and the plank was pierced right through. The men raised a cheer at this and redoubled their efforts

to complete the armory. A small quantity of treated steel plate was available, and Hanley had these made up into shields.

By eleven o'clock the first of the new weapons was delivered and a party of three was able to have a few minutes' practice in manipulating it. It was a simple matter to operate one, and the skilled workmen needed no elaborate directions. In a short time they were able to direct a deadly stream of missiles at a target.

Murgatroyd came and inspected them. "So history repeats itself," he murmured half to himself. "The cross-bow superseding the long-bow, just as it did six centuries ago."

"Aye, but the gun ousted them both. We must construct guns as soon as we can, when ye've found the new metal."

They returned to Murgatroyd's office for a final talk. Thompson came in while they were waiting for midnight, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

"I've worked out all those combinations, sir. They come to much more than I expected, but those tungsten group-values look very promising. Look! Here they are, and look at these formulae!"

"By Jove, Tommy, that does look promising." His long finger ran eagerly along a line of Thompson's calculations. "That's a neat integration! This is extraordinary! What an immense simplification of our problem."

"Yes, sir. But it will take at least a year to work through all these combinations."

"What's that, laddie? A year? Aweel, we have a year's supplies."

"Yes, sir. It's a race against time!"

"Aye, a race which we'll win."

"Rather! Of course we may spot the winner earlier if we have luck."

A confused shouting from without interrupted them.

"Come, Jamieson. It is time. I'll see you tomorrow, Tommy, about those tests."

"Yes, sir. I'll have everything ready. There are five thousand seven hundred and forty-two combinations. Just think, one of them may be Sylvia Metal."

"Eh? What? Sylvia Metal?"

Thompson grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, sir. I always think of it as that, and it just slipped out!"

"Sylvia Metal! Aweel, aweel, aweel!"

HANLEY with an agitated face met them as they made their way to the main gate.

"It's Buddy Jones, sir. He says he can't wait all night!"

The crouching forms of the rescue party and the supporting detachments could be discerned in the dim light. Jamieson took a look through the wicket-gate.

"There he is, with his three companions again. Ready, Murgatroyd? Then off ye go, and guid luck go with ye."

The wicket-gate was opened and the spare form of the professor stepped out.

"Ah, you've come, Murgatroyd, have you? You're late!"

The professor stood humbly and dejectedly in front of the redoubtable Buddy Jones, his downcast mien expressive of humiliation and defeat. Jamieson chuckled delightedly.

"Eh, but he's a grand actor. Whist noo."

"I said, 'You're late,' Murgatroyd."

"I—I'm sorry. It is a little difficult to judge of the passage of time, now that all our clocks have stopped."

"Huh!" grunted the other. "Well, I'm waiting."

Murgatroyd's features worked silently for a moment. "You are too strong for us," he muttered.

"Are you going to hand over your supplies, damn you?"

For answer the professor turned and waved his hand toward the main gate, which was being slowly opened. Buddy Jones started in alarm.

"Now then! No funny tricks! What's your game?"

"No game at all, look!"

The gate was opened wide, and a hand truck loaded with sacks of foodstuffs emerged, propelled forward by half a dozen men.

A growl, almost a roar, came from the end of the street, where a large body of the besieging force had collected. Buddy Jones held up his hand, shouting at the top of his voice.

"Keep back! This is a trick! Keep back, you fools!"

But the sight of plentiful food was too much for the starving men. In twos and threes they began to run forward away from the control of their leaders. In vain Buddy Jones tried to marshal some sort of order among them. For the moment, everything was forgotten but the prospect of easing the terrible craving for food. Buddy Jones was swept aside, shouting and imploring, while the mob tore at the sacks on the truck.

Jamieson waited, with his breath coming quickly with excitement, and at the precise moment when an onslaught would have the maximum effect, he raised his

hand in a signal. With a roar of fury his men responded and swept forward in a magnificent charge. The attack was covered by a deadly discharge of missiles from their hastily constructed weapons. The result was appalling, and the street was strewn with shrieking and writhing men. Taken completely by surprise, the mob made an ineffective resistance and retreated hastily.

"Kill the prisoners!" screamed Buddy Jones.

Desperately he tried to organize a counter-attack. He had posted his archers in points of vantage, and a rain of arrows came from the entrance to an alleyway, halfway along the street. Jamieson, however, had anticipated this, and a party of cross-bow men directed a hot fire among them. Shrieks and curses told of the effect of this and the hail of arrows slackened.

Meanwhile the rescue party swept forward and in a few seconds reached the prisoners. The operation was brilliantly successful, and the concentrated fire of six cross-bows kept the mob at bay, while the unfortunate men were slashed free from the stakes. Before the mob could realize what was happening, the rescuers were hastening back with disciplined rapidity and steadiness, carrying the rescued men, who were too stiff and cramped to walk.

Then the mob surged in pursuit, maddened at the prospect of the loss of the promised food supplies; but they found themselves confronted by a grim row of ugly looking little machines, from which a stream of whistling, shining shafts began to rain death among them. Again and again they charged, only to recoil before those twanging machines, leaving a heap of dead and dying on the ground. Jamieson began to withdraw his men now that their objective was achieved. A skilful rearguard action safeguarded their retreat in face of the furious onslaughts of the frenzied mob.

BUDDY JONES was not lacking in animal courage. Besides, he knew only too well what his fate would be, if he had to face his followers smarting under defeat and, worse still, realizing that their hopes of staving off starvation had gone. Wildly haranguing his men, he gathered them for a last frantic effort before the main gate was slammed in their faces. A hail of arrows heralded a terrific charge, which broke through the ranks of the rearguard. A frightful mêlée ensued in which men fought each other with all the primitive savagery of a long-forgotten period.

At this moment Buddy Jones flung himself forward in a desperate attempt to rally his men. It so happened that Jamieson, who had been in the thick of the fight, was shepherding the rearguard of his men into order. The two men suddenly found themselves face to face. Without an instant's hesitation Buddy Jones hurled himself on his hated opponent.

Jamieson dodged his onrush warily and the infuriated man staggered past him, losing his balance for the moment. Jamieson raised his club and brought it down with his full strength on the bullet head of the agitator. It was a terrific blow and Buddy Jones crumpled up under it. Jamieson battered again and again at the prostrate figure of his enemy at his feet, and he had to be pulled away by an alarmed Hanley, who feared that his chief would be left behind.

Discouraged by the fall of their leader, the mobs decreased the fury of their attack and the defenders were able to withdraw safely through the main gate, which closed with a resounding clang, leaving the furious crowd to howl itself hoarse outside.

As the lust of battle died down, Jamieson felt weak and shaken. Opening his eyes, he found Murgatroyd looking down at him solicitously.

"I'm a' richt, laddie. Save us, but I'm a bit afraid of myself now. Are we all slipping back to savagery? It's a fearful thing to enjoy killing a man. Are the men all right?"

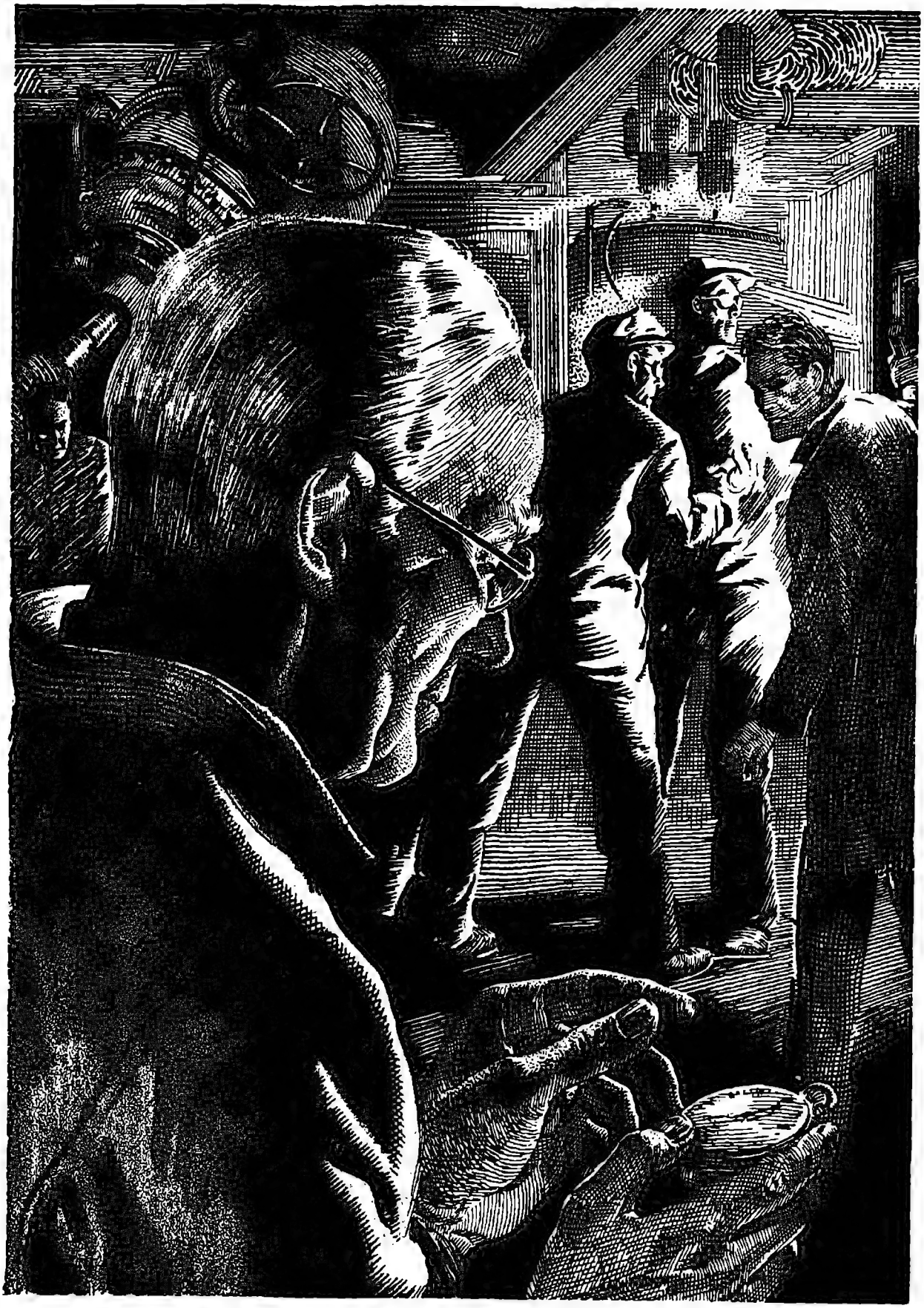
"Hanley says they are delighted at your success. They want to have another go at the mob, as soon as all our weapons are ready."

"Slipping back to savagery! Murgatroyd, you'll have to have a care for that. What's the use of saving mankind if we become savages in the process? Aye, and brutal savages at that."

Murgatroyd regarded him with troubled eyes. "I have tried to foresee what was coming to us all. I have been a prey to a vague dread. Surely we can keep ourselves free from the awful effects of losing all that England has stood for. Ruin and destruction all round us! We alone can preserve the old order and civilization. We must build a new England on the ruins of the old!"

"Oh aye, to be sure. But I enjoyed bashing in that brute's head more than anything else I have ever done. How do ye explain that?"

Murgatroyd laughed. "You old scoun-



A shiver ran through them all. Were they in the presence of a new malignant force conjured up for the first time by science something beyond Nature?

drel! It's your wild and savage ancestors' blood coming out in you. Wild Highlanders!"

"Nae doot," nodded Jamieson. "But there's a wild tribesman in everyone's ancestry, if you go back far enough. In six months' time, what shall we all be like? A pack of howling savages? How are ye going to prevent that?"

"Order, discipline, work! Those will carry us along in safety."

"Maybe. But it's an unnatural life cooped up here. And with no women, mind ye."

"We can preserve ourselves from the shocks of the outer world by self-discipline."

"Like a pack of monks in a monastery? Weel, I'm no' saying it can't be done. But I hope you find the new metal soon." He chuckled quietly. "Sylvia Metal! Aye, there'll be no trouble from that young spark. He'll work day and night for his girl. Maybe he has more sense in his little finger than us two old fules blathering of work, order, and discipline."

Murgatroyd smiled austerely. "Perhaps. But I would rather pin my faith to pure science, logical deduction, and the triumph of intellect. Such things have nothing in common with savagery."

"All verra fine. But where was your cold logic when you faced Buddy Jones this night, while we waited in ambush with our pulses racing and the lust of blood stirring the hackles on our necks? We're men of flesh and blood, not machines." He yawned cavernously. "I'm half asleep already. Fighting makes an auld man like me verra tired. It's the terrific drain on my emotions. I tell ye, I'm fair scared of myself. Weel, good night. I'll go the rounds and see all snug for the night."

There was no renewal of the attack that night. The haggard, starving rabble outside took itself off before morning and there was a period of complete quietude, but hostile demonstrations were renewed the next day. Jamieson kept his men in hand and refused to lead them forth to the attack of the raging mob.

"Let them rave, poor devils, let them be! They are doing us no harm and they'll tire of shouting before long."

He was right. The demonstrations died away gradually, as soon as hunger drove the unhappy wretches wilder afield in the search for food. In a few days absolute quiet reigned and there was no sign of life in the city, so far as they could see, other than ominous flights of scavenging birds over the deserted buildings. After a lapse of two weeks, Jamieson took a scouting party cautiously to spy out the land. They returned within a few hours, curiously silent and speaking in hushed tones of what they had seen.

The city was dead. Everywhere empty echoing streets in which the grass was already growing. Empty buildings, toppling ruins, desolation and solitude. No sign of life anywhere. The great city of Birmingham was dead.

CHAPTER VIII

AT BRADLEY PARVA

IT WAS a lovely May morning, more than six months after the coming of the Trouble. Sylvanus Dale leaned on a gate and surveyed the glorious countryside in a mood of bland contentment. He looked, if anything, more bronzed and full of healthy energy than ever. His simple homespun clothes hung loosely and comfortably upon him, but could not conceal the powerful frame of the man within them. His genial, good-natured face radiated energy and confidence, as he surveyed his little kingdom.

Beyond the lush pastures in the field he was surveying with such content, the land fell slightly and he could see the shining levels of the marshland that he had flooded last autumn, when the Trouble came. This reminder of that dreadful time clouded his serene brow for a moment, but the glory of the May morning soon laved away all gloomy thoughts from his mind. The great red cows browsed and munched among the cool green grass with much lusty sniffing at the rich scents of the daisy-pied pasture. Sylvanus Dale drew a deep breath of satisfaction. The world was indeed a goodly heritage.

In the field behind him, the potato crop was well above ground and a line of farm laborers was working along the rows of plants toward him, hoeing the soil. Dale turned to watch them and saw his daughter coming toward him along a path across the field. She waved and quickened her pace.

"I thought I should find you here, Daddy, watching the cows."

The end man of the row of hoers straightened himself, leaning on his hoe. He, too, was comfortably dressed in loose clothes made of homespun. It was Simpson, all the lines of city-bred worries smoothed from his tanned face. He had

grown a short torpedo beard, which he managed to keep trimmed by stealing off with Sylvia Dale's scissors, whenever he could manage to abstract them. Much to Sylvia's indignation as these scissors, renewed from time to time when a convoy from Birmingham arrived, were her most treasured possession.

"I came out to tell you it was time for lunch, Daddy. You'll come with us, Simmy?"

"Yes, do," seconded Sylvanus Dale.

Simpson needed no pressing and Dale told the young people to walk on.

"I'll follow in a minute. I want to ask Tanner about that groggy gate-post in the stockade. We can't afford to let our defenses get into bad condition."

The young people were a pretty sight. Youth and perfect health combined with a natural cheerfulness to send them laughing and chattering over the smiling pastures toward Bradley Parva Rectory. Their way lay entirely along field paths, for there was a back entrance to the rectory through an old brick wall, mellowed to a warm mosaic of soft dull red. But Sylvia turned thoughtful in the midst of their light-hearted chatter.

"Daddy is worried about something."

"Worried? What is there to worry about now?"

"I can't think. I can't imagine why we didn't all go crazy during the winter. But now—everything seems so quiet and peaceful."

Simpson did not answer for a space. They were walking in single file along a path deep-meadowed in a sea of buttercups, the drone of innumerable insects around them. Lovely though the countryside was, he had eyes only for the slim figure of the girl striding with slender grace in front of him.

They came to a stile, and he gently detained her as she swung her lithe young body across the top rail.

"Simmy, dear!" she protested, with a soft smile at his face.

"Darling, our whole lives are slipping away. We shall grow old and end our days in this place. Well, I am content. Where you are, there is paradise."

She gently repulsed him. "I said I would wait. You are a darling, Simmy, and I don't know what I should have done without you during the dreadful days. But I promised Tommy I would wait. It is Tommy I love. You would not have me fail him."

"But suppose—I mean, if by any chance —I hardly like to say it, but we haven't heard from Birmingham for over six weeks. Suppose something has happened. . ."

"Simmy! What do you mean?"

"A girl must have a protector these days. If Thompson doesn't come. . ."

He did not see the panic in her eyes which his chance words had roused. It was true, they had not had word for some time, though she told herself there were a dozen simple explanations of this silence. It had happened before, during the dreadful days. White-faced she turned to her companion, only to find him staring at her with a hot insistence from which she instinctively recoiled. His hands gripped her shoulders and held her, seated on the top bar of the stile, and he pressed close to her so that she was imprisoned by his strong hands.

"Simmy, Simmy, it isn't fair," she protested angrily, jumping down.

Half hurt, half angry, she ran with all speed to the rectory, while the disconsolate lover ruefully followed.

WHEN Sylvanus Dale arrived ten minutes later, he found a pair of young people awaiting him somewhat flushed beyond the ordinary and inclined to be shy and silent. But he, good man, noticed nothing of this and quaffed a mighty flagon of home-brew set before him by a still tremulous daughter.

"Ah!" he sighed in deep content, wiping the froth from his mouth. "Grand! Really, it is like high summer today. Splendid for the crops. Isn't it wonderful how old Dame Nature goes on with her work, quite regardless of the Trouble? Everything is coming on marvelously. Now that horrible yellow fog has cleared away, it almost seems as if the whole world has taken a new lease of life. Perhaps there is something in Simmy's idea that the very principle that has destroyed metals has brought new vigor to the products of Nature."

"What a delightful idea, Simmy. All Nature glowing with a new warmth after the terrible days. How lovely!"

"Yes, lovely is the word. I feel it in the air. It is as if the old gods were walking the world again, bringing a genial paganism with them. You don't mind, sir?"

"Not a bit. The Church is eternal and has not perished. She can tame the pagan gods, as you call them, and turn them to her own purpose as she did in the old days."

The conversation drifted away to trivial matters. Simpson had become a sort of assistant or deputy for the governor of their little province, and the elder man had gradually left all matters of detail in the hands of the capable young man, while keeping a guiding hand over him.

A cloud passed over Dale's sunny face. "I am a little anxious. It is nearly six weeks since we heard from Murgatroyd. Something has delayed the convoys. It is getting rather awkward, as we are running short of metal articles. Though," he added after a pause, "I think we could manage now without his supplies."

Simpson did not reply for a moment. Something leaped within him at the faint suggestion in Dale's remark. His voice was hardly steady when he asked, "You said just now that Murgatroyd would not fail. Do you really think that or are you beginning to contemplate our going on here without him?"

"It has always been in mind as a possibility, though I try to put it from me. Sometimes. . . " Dale paused and paced to and fro, rubbing the back of his head. "Sometimes," he continued, "I almost wish he might fail!"

Simpson looked up in surprise. Subconsciously he had felt the same wish and had put it from him as an unworthy thought. But to hear his secret, shameful hope voiced by their revered ruler gave him something of a shock.

"I have been dreaming dreams during the long, peaceful days, since our anxiety about being attacked has died down. Dreams! I have dreamed of building a new England on the ruins of the old."

"With the help of the new metal?"

"No! A thousand times no! Building a new England on the basis of our little colony here. Look how happy we all are. Happy and healthy. In this tiny village Merrie England has come again. This is how it must have been before machinery came to plague us with its dismal puffing and clanking. Men created machines, thinking to make them their servants. But the machine became the master, herding men into towns, and binding them to ever stricter servitude."

SIMPSON puffed his pipe contentedly. "I think I see what you mean. The object of life is to be happy."

"That's it. Unselfishness and all the rest of it are only the means of making happiness."

"Well, Daddy, didn't machines help to make us happy? People loved going out in cars and dancing to radios."

"And having telephones and cream separators," put in Simpson.

"Good roads, clean water supply—"

"Steam laundries—"

"Electric light—"

"Gas cookers—"

"Help! Help!" Dale laughed, putting up his hands. "But wait a minute. I'll add a few to the list. Food in tin and cans. Gasoline fumes. Noise and clatter. Polluted streams. The Black Country. Slums. Unemployment. Shoddy clothing. Anxiety and worry—"

Simpson and Sylvia cried out at this appalling list.

"Our turn to cry for help. What do you think, Sylvie?"

"All the same, machines were wonderful. Your horrid list of nasty things could be cured."

"By more machines?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Surely they made people better off?"

"I'll answer you, darling, with another question. Have you, and all the rest of us, ever been so happy, and so healthy, as we have been here in Bradley Parva since the Trouble?"

A soft look came into Sylvia's eyes. "Yes. It's true. I am happy."

"And you, Simmy?"

"Yes. It's wonderful. In spite of our living in a state of siege, in constant danger of attack, exposed to all weathers—in spite of all this, we are happy. He sighed deeply, puffing his pipe and resting his eyes on Sylvia.

"Then I think that disposes of the machines. When I look back now and think of the dirt and misery, the blasted country scorched with smoke and chemical fumes, I marvel at our subservience to the Machine. Its one design appeared to be to insist on more and ever more slaves, to herd them into horrible towns, and to demand endless service day and night. There was no end to it. The machines made more slaves, and the slaves made more machines. A terrible speedway, as it were, round which mankind raved ever faster and faster—to what end?"

His earnestness silenced them for a time.

"Really, Daddy, you frighten me a little," Sylvia said. "You speak of the Machine as if it was a living thing, an evil thing. Almost like you speak of the devil."

Dale started. "Do I? Well, perhaps . . . I wonder. As I say, I can almost find it in

my heart to wish that Murgatroyd may fail. It would be a terrible disappointment to him to have to confess failure, but he would come to see that out of the supposed failure would spring a magnificent success. A great and fine England free for all time from the tyranny of the Machine!"

"Tommy won't fail. I know it."

"Well, well, if he does we'll bring all Murgatroyd's people here, Tommy and all. So we'll dance at your wedding, whatever happens."

A cloud again passed over Dale's serene features, as though an unpleasant thought had recurred. His daughter, quick to detect his passing moods, noted this, and she ran to his side.

"Daddy, something has been worrying you for the last few days. What is it?"

"Nothing, nothing, child. Now run along and clear away. Simmy and I will have another pipe before going back to work."

Sylvia hesitated for a moment, then she ran out calling to their maid as she went.

"Jessie! Jessie!"

"Yes, miss."

"Come and help me to clear away. I'll come and wash up."

TOGETHER they strode along the village street, greeted respectfully by the busy villagers as they passed. They were on the main road which formerly led to Evesham and Oxford, but at a turn in the road, where it ran along a spit of high ground between two inundations, they came upon a stout timber stockade completely barring the village from the outside world.

A gate house flanked the sturdy gate, and the guard turned out smartly as soon as they saw Dale approaching. They were furnished with bows and arrows and stout clubs swinging from leather belts, and they were clad in stout leather jerkins and close-fitting leather caps. The sergeant said that one Kennedy, a former neighbor, was waiting outside with some of his fellow tribesmen.

"Bring them in, please. I'll see them here in the guardroom. They must deposit their arms outside. One of the tribesmen can stay outside and watch over them."

Dale and Simpson went into the guardroom, where chairs were placed for them. In a few moments there was the tramp of feet and the sergeant and his men came in, escorting Kennedy and two tribesmen. They were tall, weatherbeaten figures, clad picturesquely in skins of many animals. Their beards were unkempt, and their hair hung long over their shoulders, giving them a wild and savage appearance, but they moved with the easy grace of men accustomed to living in the open air and they radiated vigor and rude health.

Kennedy saluted Dale respectfully and smiled at Simpson. In response to an invitation he seated himself in a chair facing Dale, while his followers stood behind him. Simpson handed round his tobacco pouch, which was pounced upon eagerly by the tribesmen. Pipes were produced and lit while they talked commonplaces.

Kennedy inhaled a deep breath and blew out a cloud of smoke. "Ah," he exclaimed, "that's good. Better than the awful stuff we have to make shift with—dried cabbage leaves and that sort of muck."

"Home-grown," replied Dale. "I was experimenting with growing tobacco when the Trouble came."

"Lucky for you, sir. And for us," he added politely.

"Would you like anything to eat or drink?"

"No, thank you kindly all the same. We aren't starving any longer. Things aren't as short as they were. We had a pretty bad time in the winter. There were more mouths to be fed then and less of everything than there is now."

"Poor fellows!"

"Oh, it ain't so bad now. . . . If only I could forget the past. It won't bear thinking of."

"How did you become chief?"

"It just happened. We kept running away from the horrible sights and sounds when the Trouble came. Everything went bust after a few weeks, as you know. There was a group of us stuck together—country folk like me, who knew a bit about trapping and looking after herds and growing vegetables. But we soon found we had to fight to keep what we had. You know."

"Yes, we saw something of those dreadful times."

"I dare say we were fools not to have come in with you—if you'd have had us. But there it is, we didn't; and we stuck it out somehow. They began to look to me to lead them, and there were other bands like ours, mainly composed of decent country folk, who joined up with us. I don't know exactly how it happened. We didn't think about things very much—it was a whole time job keeping alive."

"It must have been terrible."

Kennedy shrugged his mighty shoulders. "Oh, well, the weakest went to the wall. It

couldn't be helped. The rest looked to me more and more and—well, I'm chief of the South Worcestershires now. We are a pretty decent lot, I think. We've tried to keep ourselves decent in spite of everything. We are mostly country folk from around here. Some of these town-bred tribes are a wild lot and we don't have much to do with them. So far we have kept them out of our lands."

They gossiped in this strain for some time, but at last Dale came straight to the point and asked Kennedy what he had come to see him about. Kennedy puffed his pipe once or twice before replying.

"Do you remember Buddy Jones—the agitator? He was always a firebrand in the old days, out for violence every time."

"By Jove, yes, I remember the fellow. He was the ringleader in the attacks on the laboratory in Birmingham, when the Trouble first started. You remember, Simmy, I showed you Murgatroyd's letter."

"Yes, that's the chap. A little foxy-looking blighter with a round bullet head, isn't he, Kennedy?"

"That's him. They say he is organizing a combination of the tribes—the worst ones, town-bred scum, jail-birds. We have had trouble with that sort already in small numbers."

"What is there to fear from him?"

Kennedy paused again. He frowned and drummed his fingers on his knee. "I've had a visit from the man and I don't mind saying I'm scared. Scared for my tribe. Oh, he was soft-spoken enough at first—talked about being friendly and reasonable."

"Well?"

"I couldn't make it out at all at first. He spoke of giving us protection in return for supplies. I told him to go to hell."

"What did he say to that?"

"I tell you he is a devil! He snarled at me that I'd regret it if I didn't come in on his side. He hinted that he would soon be strong enough to come and smash us up, if I didn't see sense. He said the most horrible things about what he would do to us."

"Hard words break no bones."

"That's true enough. I had to put up with a good deal of wild talk before I became chief. Maybe I gave as good as I got." Kennedy smiled grimly. "But there is something about Buddy Jones that is different. He gives you the shivers. I don't know for sure what his game is, but it looks as if he is engineering a combination of some of the tribes. There's queer rumors going round."

"What sort of rumors?"

"They say he has got a stronghold somewhere near Evesham. There are nasty stories of what is happening there. I thought maybe you might have heard?"

"No. We have had no convoy from Murgatroyd for six weeks."

KENNEDY raised his eyebrows and whistled softly. "Looks bad, doesn't it? They say he has sworn vengeance against Murgatroyd—and you. Maybe you aren't afraid of his threats. You're pretty strong here. But I thought you would like to be warned about him."

Dale sprang to his feet and paced the room. "Yes, it was good of you, Kennedy, and I won't forget it."

"Oh, well, you have been good to me, and I haven't forgotten the way you took me in when I broke my leg."

"Is this some new danger sent to try us, just when we thought we were becoming secure against further danger? I'll take no chances. Simmy, we'll deal with this as we have dealt with all our other trials."

"Rather! But, Kennedy, are you absolutely sure?"

"I can only say I've seen some of Buddy Jones's men myself. They were nearly a hundred strong. They didn't see me, but I saw them. Moving toward Malvern, and not badly disciplined either."

"Well, thanks again for the warning. Come and see me if there is anything further to report."

Kennedy rose to go. He smiled at Dale's last words and shook his head. "I shan't be seeing you again for some time. We are moving up into Wales for a bit."

"Moving? The whole tribe moving? Why?"

Kennedy walked slowly to the door and then turned toward Dale and Simpson. "Buddy Jones," he said, and went out with the sergeant.

The two men were left staring at one another. There was silence for a time, broken only by the sound of Dale pacing up and down the little room. Then he turned to Simpson, throwing back his shoulders in a characteristic gesture of robust determination.

"Come, Simmy, we must act as if this information from Kennedy is true. Perhaps it is inevitable that the blackguard element of the population should try to take advantage of the helpless condition of England. We are secure against the isolated gangs that have assailed us from time to time; but an organized attack in

large numbers by disciplined bodies of men —that is another matter. We must be prepared day and night for such an attack. It's an infernal nuisance, just when the crops are beginning to come on so well. I'll work it out and let you have the necessary orders. Meanwhile, will you go along and tell Sylvie? She must organize the women. Tell her to work on Scheme B for the present. She will understand."

Sylvia was helping Jessie with household tasks, gossiping the while.

"What is bothering the Master, miss?"

"So you have noticed it too?"

"Oh, yes. He hasn't been himself at all the last few days—walking up and down and rubbing the back of his head. In this beautiful weather, too. It's a shame."

"I think he is worried because there is no news from Professor Murgatroyd."

"That's what Albert says. I can't see that it matters much."

"But, Jessie, it would be awful if anything happened to them."

"Well, what I mean is, when so many have perished it don't make much odds if a few more go the same way. Stands to reason."

"But think of all the poor women here waiting for news of their men."

Jessie tossed her pretty chin. "There'll be enough men for the girls worth marrying. The rest will have to do without."

"Are you going to marry Albert?"

"I'm sure I don't know. He's always pestering me. I don't want to marry anyone. But if I do, it will have to be someone young and strong. That's what a girl wants these days." Jessie sighed. "Not that I don't like Dick Turner a lot, poor little chap. It isn't his fault he's so small, and it was a great shame the way Albert walloped him. I boxed his ears good and proper for it. Dick can say such lovely things. But he hasn't asked me to marry him." She sighed again. "It's very puzzling."

"Suppose Albert took you, and walloped you until you promised to marry him."

"I'd like to see him try. . I wouldn't mind so much if it was Albert, but I'd cry my eyes out if Dick touched me. It's very puzzling, isn't it, miss? Of course there's Tom Oliver, too, and Sam Small. I'm sure I don't know."

They pursued their tasks for a time in silence. Then Jessie, peering out of the window, announced that Simpson was coming down the road.

"He'll be going back to the potato hoeing, I expect."

Jessie snorted. "Potato hoeing! You'll see him turn in here."

"Now, Jessie, I won't have you talking about that again. You know I am engaged to Mr. Thompson."

"Wait till he comes, I say," she replied darkly.

"Nonsense!"

"Mr. Simpson is young and strong. That's all I say."

"Good gracious! Do you want them to fight each other? You awful girl!"

"Wait till he comes!"

Sylvia laughed joyously. "I believe you want Mr. Simpson to wallop poor Tommy."

"Well, suppose he did?"

Something stirred inside Sylvia in the midst of her laughter. Her eyes flashed. "I'd claw his eyes out if he did!"

Jessie shrieked with delight. "That's it, miss. Didn't I say it is the natural way to settle things nowadays? All very well to be prim and proper before the Trouble came. But those days are gone. the world has changed."

SYLVIA was panting after her sudden outburst, of which she already felt a little ashamed. With an effort she steadied herself. "But we haven't changed," she maintained.

"Oh, haven't we? Just you wait till he comes. And suppose he doesn't come?"

"Jessie, dear, don't be unkind. It keeps me awake at night, wondering why we don't get news from Birmingham."

Jessie ran to her side full of contrition. "There, miss, I'm sorry and I don't mean anything. I was just teasing. Of course he'll come with his dark eyes and pale face, so romantic-looking, I'm sure." She sighed heavily. "I wish Albert was romantic-looking. But he is so big and his face is so red that I couldn't imagine him saying anything poetical. I'd burst out laughing if he did. But it is lovely when he picks me right up and squeezes me till I can't breathe." She sighed noisily again. "Dick Turner couldn't do that. I'm sure it's all very difficult."

A knock on the door interrupted them. "There, miss, what did I tell you? There he is!" And she ran off to let Simpson in.

"Your father has asked me to come and tell you about our talk with Kennedy," Simpson told Sylvia.

"Yes?"

"I—er—the news isn't very good."

"Tell me, Simmy, straight out."

"There are rumors of a combination of tribes against us under a firebrand called

Buddy Jones. You remember, the man who attacked the laboratory last year."

"We aren't afraid of the tribesmen, poor wretches."

"No, not the isolated gangs that used to threaten us. But this is something more than that. A regular combination against us."

"What does Daddy say?"

"He has accepted the story as a true one, and is going to take precautions accordingly. He asked me to tell you to work on Scheme B for the present. He is bothered by the interference this means with the farm work, just when we are at our busiest."

"Is that all that is worrying him?"

"I think so."

"Had Kennedy any news from Birmingham?"

"No, Sylvie dear . . . . "

"Simmy, please!"

"I know, darling. But I just want to say that, if there is never any news—if anything should happen—Sylvie, we are letting the best part of our lives go by. Maybe we shall live our whole life in this little place. Must we go on waiting year after year, hungering for the love which old Dame Nature has planted so deeply in us?"

"I can't prevent you loving me. . . ."

"I am speaking of real warm-blooded love. Not the thin anemic kind, where the hero languishes forever making eyes at his lady from afar. Sylvie, forget that other fellow! Your father dreams of building a new and happy England. I'm part of that dream—and so are you. We were in some other world, some other life, before the Trouble. This is our real life now."

"Simmy, do be good. You mustn't talk like that. What would Daddy think if he heard you?"

"Your father? He would consent to our marriage. He knows I am in love with you How useless words are! Must I talk in the bygone phrases of a world that no longer exists? Words, words, words, what use are they?" With outstretched arms he advanced upon her.

"Simmy, please, please!"

"I cannot wait any longer. These tribesmen have settled it for us. They will wipe out Murgatroyd's laboratory and. . ."

She thrust him from her roughly, color ebbing from her cheeks. All her repressed fears about the laboratory came flooding back with redoubled force. She beat him off with harsh cries of rage.

"How dare you say such things? You brute! Let me go! I hate you!"

He released her, frightened by her fury, but she continued to revile him until tears choked her, tears of rage, tears of fright at the fate of the laboratory. Simpson felt his violent feelings abating somewhat at the sight of her tears. He began to feel ashamed of his rough wooing.

"I'm sorry, Sylvie dear. I didn't mean half of what I said—about Birmingham, I mean. They'll be all right." Still she shook with the violence of her crying. "Sylvie, darling!" He tried to go to her and comfort her, but she roughly shook him off.

"Leave me alone! It's been a nightmare to me these last weeks. Why isn't there any news? What has happened? It's Tommy I love! I shall die if anything has . . . I can't say it. I've thought of it so often and I'm terrified. The last brave stand, the overwhelming rush of the attackers, the end. . . And now you, you dare to speak of love in the name of. . . Oh, I can't bear it. You Simmy, how could you do it?"

"I'm a beast. I'm terribly sorry. I'm a fool, too. They'll be all right. Jamieson will see to that."

"If I could only believe it. Why isn't there any news? Why don't we hear from them?"

"There are a dozen simple explanations of that. This rumor about hostile tribes may be true and that may have prevented Murgatroyd's convoy from getting through. But that's a very different matter from imagining that the laboratory has been attacked, or is even in danger at all."

Sylvia shook her head, still crying piteously. "If I could only believe that. But you said. . . ."

"I was a mad fool. I shouldn't have said such things, such idiotic nonsense. Come, Sylvie. . . ." He went to her and tried to comfort her but she shook him off.

"Don't touch me, Simmy. I can't trust you any more—or myself either. We are all changed, I think. The world has changed and we have changed with it. We can fight against it, but it is true. We have gone back through the ages. This time last year you would not have dreamed of trying to force me. . . . Dream? Is that what has happened? Are we in an evil dream, from which we shall wake? No, Simmy. Let me be. Tommy is not in this dream. He is real and I am waiting for him. I am not going back to the love-making of the twentieth century B. C.!"

"Sylvie dear, you are making me terribly unhappy."

"Don't. I hate to hear you talk like that. Be the nice kind Simmy I like so much. Do you think it isn't hard for me to go on waiting and waiting, with that dreadful fear gnawing at me all the time?"

Her sobs gradually subsided, and Simpson set himself to speak as normally as he could, without arousing her alarm about the laboratory. Under his persuasion she rapidly recovered herself, and by the time that her father returned she had regained control, and even his shrewd glance did not detect any signs of the strained relations which had arisen between them.

Dale was, indeed, far too preoccupied with the new danger which had arisen to bother himself about anything else.

"You have told her? Good! We will take every precaution, and heaven send we are not attacked."

"You believe that tale?"

"I'll take no chances. We have weathered other dangers and we'll weather this too. Remember that we stand for the new England I have dreamed about. Right is on our side and it shall prevail!"

CHAPTER IX

DANGER FROM THE TRIBES

SPRING brought hope anew to the laboratory in Birmingham. The deadly depression of the winter passed away with the lengthening days, and, although they seemed no nearer to the solution of the desperate problem before them, the balmy airs of March and April raised everyone's spirits. The winter had been long and terribly cold. A hard frost throughout January and half February had accentuated the misery and hastened the end of the starving multitudes. But when the frost broke up, it was succeeded by a marvelous spring; and, best of all, when they looked out over the deserted ruins of the city in the brilliant March sunshine, it was seen that the yellow fog had gone. They breathed in deep draughts of soft, perfume-laden air, blowing over the smokeless ruins from the reviving countryside. Gone were the dark days when fear of attack kept them on the alert day and night, and disappointment after disappointment in their search for the new metal depressed them. Hope stirred again.

They had not been seriously attacked again after Buddy Jones's tremendous effort to rush them. But they never knew whether some fresh onslaught would be organized with better weapons than they had yet encountered, and constant preparedness was necessary. For a time there was a tendency for yelling mobs to collect outside in the street at a safe distance, uttering threatening cries and occasionally firing long shots with their bows and arrows.

But the defenders remained grim and silent behind their walls and made no attempt to sally forth. These demonstrations diminished rapidly as soon as the starving populace dispersed to the country in search of food, and in a few weeks Birmingham contained no living soul beyond a few aged, sick, or crippled folk, who were physically unable to stand the fatigues of a hopeless tramp in quest of food.

As soon as possible Jamieson organized communications with Bradley Parva by means of a regular weekly convoy. The convoy took with it a number of useful metal articles, treated to last for a short time, and brought back a supply of fresh foodstuffs. They were a well-armed force ready to defend themselves against marauders, and they often had brisk skirmishes with wretched half-starved and ill-armed bands. By means of these convoys Murgatroyd was able to learn something about the terrible happenings outside the walls of the sheltered laboratory.

Yet their reports were surprisingly meager. Their orders were to move as rapidly and as unobtrusively as possible to their destination, so that there was no time to investigate the conditions into which the country had fallen. There was a certain monotony about reports of fallen bridges, deserted towns, gaunt lines of telegraph poles without any wires, collapsed buildings and sinister flights of fattening birds of prey.

By the time the convoys began to move, the first frenzied rush of maddened people from the barren towns had ended in misery and disaster, with the wholesale death of thousands from exposure, fatigue, and privation. A period of utter confusion followed, and all attempts to maintain even the semblance of law and order completely disappeared. Such authorities as tried to organize resistance to this anarchy were swept aside, and soon perished miserably from privation themselves. A wail of anguish swept over the land, and unavailing prayers were shrieked at the unanswering brazen skies, which still shone murkily with an unnatural yellow glare. The Machine, to which the people had sold their souls, de-

serted them in their dire need and mocked at their misery.

After some months of confusion, during which the major portion of the population of the island perished, the survivors tended to form themselves into bands for self-defense. These bands of tribes consisted of the sturdiest of the men, together with a certain number of women and children, who had managed to secure sufficient supplies to keep them alive during the winter, or who, like Kennedy's tribe, had some skill in trapping wild animals. There were also bands of sturdy villains, who sold their services to weak communities in return for food.

All warehouses in the towns were of course looted, and there was at first no lack of many useful articles. Boots and clothing were plentiful, but it was almost ludicrous to find how useless most of the products of the Machine Age were, when the machines themselves had stopped. In the towns shop after shop remained untouched after the first orgy of looting. No one wanted what was in them, though the goods displayed in the windows could have been taken away merely for the trouble of carrying them. Food was the paramount demand, and tribes which had accumulated a supply refused to sell any portion of their hoard even for handfuls of looted jewelry and gold.

IT was one of the convoys that came in contact with Buddy Jones, whose thick skull had survived Jamieson's crashing blow. The convoy was camped for the night, and sentries had been posted by Hanley, who was in charge. At sundown there came a sudden challenge, followed by the alarm signal. Everyone sprang to arms with disciplined order, and Hanley hastened from his tent to the threatened quarter. A large armed party could be seen at the foot of the slight hill, on whose summit they had camped, on the site of an ancient earthwork. The main body of the party made no move, but a single man started to plod up the hill bearing a white flag. Hanley gave orders to stand to, in case of an attempt at surprise.

It was a chill autumn evening, and the cooking smoke of their camp hung above them in the still air, bringing the acrid smell of wood smoke to their nostrils. There was no sound, save a faint murmur of activity from within the camp, as they watched the solitary figure of the stranger steadily plodding up the hill, waving his flag at them now and again as though to assure his safety. He was a smallish man with a scrubby beard, dressed in rough clothes and unarmed, so far as they could see. As soon as he came within shouting distance, Hanley called to him to halt.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"No offense, mister," was the reply. "I'm unarmed. Can I come nearer? I want to talk."

"Stay where you are, till my men have searched you. Then you can come in under escort."

"All right, mister. Suits me. I ain't armed."

Two men quickly ran down to him and confirmed that he was without arms. They then brought him up the last slope and over the earthwork to where Hanley was waiting in the failing twilight.

"Well, who are you?"

The man grinned. "Don't recognize me? Well, perhaps it's just as well. Though bygones is bygones, mind you."

Hanley peered at him. "Good God! It's Buddy Jones."

A menacing growl rose from the men around him, but Hanley held up his hand for silence. Buddy Jones looked round apprehensively.

"'Ere, I've come under a white flag, 'aven't I? Bygones is bygones."

The men massed threateningly round Hanley, and one of them voiced the popular sentiment. "Treat him as he treated Nobby Clark! Let's hang the blighter! Come on, Mr. Hanley, hand him over to us! We'll deal with him."

Buddy Jones went a sickly yellow under his tan. "I'm under safe conduct. You can't touch me," he snarled, baring his teeth like a trapped rat, his shifty eyes darting this way and that.

"Steady, men," cried Hanley. "It's true enough what he said. We admitted him under a white flag. We are civilized, even if he isn't."

"There's no safe conduct for brutes like him. He's vermin!"

An approving growl greeted this, but Hanley and the men's sense of discipline prevailed over their desire for revenge. There was no further attempt to seize the wretch, but the men waited in vengeful silence to hear what Buddy Jones had to say.

"Well, what do you want? Why have you come?" demanded Hanley.

"I wanted to have a nice quiet talk. Not with everybody listening." He cast a

sour look around at the stern faces of the men.

"Say what you have to say and get out."

"Oh, all right, all right. There's no secret about it. Though I thought you might be glad to see me."

Dead silence greeted this, and Buddy Jones stirred uneasily.

"Don't mistake me, mister. I'm friendly. Just come for a little friendly chat, so to speak."

"Get to the point!"

"Well, you see, mister, it's like this. After that bit of a dust-up in Birmingham, things got a bit difficult. Not that I bear any malice, mind you. It was a fair fight and you won, I don't deny that. There's no call for remembering what happened then. Maybe we both did things we didn't ought to."

"Never mind all that. We are not likely to forget."

"Now, now, don't get all heated up about nothing—"

"Nothing! Damn you! Get on with what you want to say. The quicker the better."

"I'm getting on, mister. As I was saying, things didn't pan out quite as I expected after our little affair. We really were starving; we wern't bluffing, like, maybe, you thought. It wasn't easy, with us scrounging in the gutter for scraps while you were living on the fat of the land, blast you!"

"Now then, keep a civil tongue in your head!"

"All right, all right, mister. A few of us managed to keep together and grab off enough food to keep body and soul together. Little enough there was. Little enough for us—and nothing at all for those who were not strong enough to fend for themselves."

"I suppose you and your blackguards simply took by violence what you wanted?"

"Well, wasn't that what you and your Murgatroyd were doing? None of your fine airs, Hanley! You can just come off your perch. My racket wanted brains and organization, just as much as yours. It was easy enough after a time, though we had some business rivals at first." He laughed sardonically. "We were no better and no worse than the capitalists were before the Trouble. We just grabbed for ourselves, like they did. And we had no choice, mind you. We had to keep alive somehow."

"Had you?"

"Yes, damn you, we had. We soon found that people were glad to have our protection. Protection, that's the word. All nice and respectable. People who had a bit of food naturally wanted to keep it. Well, that is where we came in. We guaranteed them protection."

"For some small payment, I suppose."

"THAT'S it. Business is business. Though money wasn't any use. We went half shares in the food. See? We didn't do so badly. In fact, we soon accumulated enough supplies to last us for a long time, and we stored them in an old country house. We had to add to our gang to garrison it. Well, I'm head of the gang. The boss, d'you see? So keep a civil tongue in *your* head, mister."

"What is all this leading to?"

"Damme, ain't it as plain as a pikestaff? You know quite well the population has split up into communities, tribes, gangs, call 'em what you like. Some are strong and well able to look after themselves. We don't try to—er—help them. But some are weak and need protection, which we supply; otherwise some misfortune is bound to happen to them sooner or later. We ain't the only gang working this racket. There's others, but they keep out of my territory."

"Well?"

"You are in my territory here. Understand that? I haven't yet offered protection to your guv'nor, nor to the reverend gent. Maybe they can look after themselves, maybe they can't. But these convoys going to and fro are a different matter. Especially as they go right through my territory without so much as asking by your leave."

"You infernal scoundrel, are you suggesting. ."

"Now, now, hard words won't make matters any easier or pleasanter. You're no fool, Hanley. We're pretty strong, me and my men, and there are others coming in with me. It might pay you to receive our protection, and you can tell Mr. Murgatroyd so with my compliments, blast him!"

"Well, I'm. . ."

"Think it over, mister, think it over quietly."

"There's nothing to think over. You can clear out."

"All right, all right, I'll go, mister. But it would be a great pity if anything happened to Mr. Murgatroyd or the reverend gent, wouldn't it? One of them waiting for news of the other and not getting it—until I give it to them. Think it over. I ain't in a hurry."

"Are you actually threatening me with

opposition on the march unless I agree to your price?"

"That's it, or something like it. Something a bit worse than opposition on the march, when you come to think it over quietly. I said you weren't a fool."

"You can go to blazes."

A murmur rose from the men who were listening to this conversation, and audible proposals to chuck Buddy Jones out unceremoniously came from all sides. The gang leader edged closer to Hanley and regarded the hostile crowd malevolently.

"You'd best stop your yammering," he snarled. "I come here with a nice friendly proposal, which will make things easy and comfortable for everybody, and this is how you treat me. Well, have it your own way; but you'll be fools if you let Hanley refuse."

"What do you mean?" growled Hanley, frowning.

"I mean some of my men haven't got wives, and others are getting tired of the ones they've got. Now the reverend gent has got more at Bradley Parva than he wants." He laughed evilly.

An ominous silence greeted this speech. Most of the men who were listening had wives, sisters, daughters, or sweethearts in Bradley Parva, and Buddy Jones's cold-blooded ultimatum reduced them to speechless fury.

Hanley found his voice. "Get out," he cried, choking down his rage.

"All right, all right. It's a pity, because I shall get my way, all the same. How?" He grinned unpleasantly. "I told you my gang was pretty strong. You don't stand a chance. I shall get a nice lot of prisoners, and I'll plant six stakes in the ground just outside Bradley Parva. . . . Oh, I know you got the best of me outside the laboratory when I tried that trick, but I wasn't caught napping ever afterward. The trick has worked beautifully in other places—and it'll work at Bradley Parva."

"Get out!" shouted Hanley. "Get out, I tell you! I won't be responsible for your safety, if you don't. You fool! The men will smash your ugly face in if you don't clear out."

This time, Buddy Jones thought it wise to scuttle off. He stood on top of the earthwork, looking down at them all. He made sure his line of retreat was clear, then he turned and spoke again. There was something about the man that made them listen. In the old days before the Trouble he had been a noted and fearless orator, facing up to a hostile crowd and turning it to his side by the sheer force of his personality. Although roused to fury by his impudent proposals, the men could not help admiring his courage in coming among them single-handed and unarmed. It was perhaps this feeling combined with their sense of discipline that restrained them from flinging him out long ago, so that they found themselves facing him waiting to hear what he had to say.

"Listen to me, Hanley. There's going to be a fair fight and the strongest will win. I'm sorry in a way, because you are a decent chap and so are your men. I don't deny that. You've treated me fair, letting me come and go unarmed. Perhaps I pressed you too hard about the women. Our gang has got into an easy-going way these days, and I thought maybe you'd be of the same mind. Well, I'll say again I'm sorry, but there it is. I'm not a bad chap really, and I'd like you to know what you are up against. I'd rather have you with me than against me, and that's a fact."

The men looked at one another in perplexity. What was coming now? Buddy Jones squared his shoulders and smirked in a self-important manner.

"There's something rather important likely to happen pretty soon. I told you there were other gangs like mine, each with their own territory more or less. Well, so far there's been honor among thieves right enough and we aren't above doing each other a good turn, provided there's no interference. But there's been a damn sight too much interference lately." He grinned ferociously, baring his yellow fangs. "There was one lot led by a thick-headed fool, who thought that brute strength was everything. I soon showed him who's who, the blasted fool. It made the others think, I can tell you."

"What has all this to do with us?"

Buddy Jones shook his head slowly in a gesture of mute exasperation at their slowness. "Ain't I telling you? It's as plain as a pikestaff. We're getting together, and mark this, Hanley, we're getting stronger. It won't be long before I'm chief of the whole lot. There are one or two standing in the way, who'd like to be chief themselves, but they are plumb stupid like all these beefy fellows."

"I suppose you will have them murdered."

BUDDY JONES grinned again. "I shouldn't be surprised if they came to a sudden end. They ought to have enough sense to come in with me, all nice and

friendly. But if they ask for trouble they'll get it. Now do you see what I am driving at? You can come over to me, all quiet and comfortable, or you can take the consequences. Is that plain enough? I'd be glad of your help to get into the laboratory. We want to have a word with Mr. Bloody Murgatroyd, me and my men do."

"You infernal. .

"Now then, now then, no need for words."

"Get out!"

"I'm going, mister. You've heard what I've said and so have your men. Maybe some of them will see sense."

"Get out! We're not afraid of you and your gang of murderers and thieves."

"You needn't worry, mister. I ain't going to attack you. In fact, me and my men will give you safe escort tomorrow. You might like to see some of the boys. Pretty well disciplined, they are. But I'll own I don't want to risk a fight—not yet. Your weapons are a bit too much for us. Besides, I want you to tell Murgatroyd and his men what I said."

Buddy Jones turned to go. "But don't think you'll be safe always. Any day now I'll be chief of the whole lot. Then I shall train them, like the men you'll see tomorrow. You'll be outnumbered hopelessly, and your superior armaments won't save you. I'll starve you out, and then what'll you do? So just get this clear, will you? I'll have no more convoys after this one. No more coming and going between Birmingham and Bradley Parva, do you hear? No more arms for the reverend gent! By the time he has had his supplies cut off for a few months I shall be ready to deal with him. After that, with all your women in my hands, it'll be easy to settle my little account with Murgatroyd. Well, don't say I didn't warn you."

A yell of execration greeted this defiance. Buddy Jones waved an ironical gesture of farewell as he turned and ran down the hill. They watched his departing figure vanishing in the deepening gloom in silence for a time. Then a murmur broke out among the men, discussing in various tones the strange story they had heard. On the whole they were not inclined to attach much importance to it, and they gradually dispersed to go about the routine tasks of their encampment. Even if there was anything in Buddy Jones's threats, they felt quite capable of dealing with his onslaughts. Hanley was, however, more thoughtful, and he entered a full account of Buddy Jones's visit in his intelligence report. Professor Murgatroyd and Jamieson would have to deal with the matter in due course.

He closed his note-book with a snap and turned to the immediate task of preparing for an attack by Buddy Jones's gang. It was possible that he had been lying with clumsy cunning when he said he was not going to attack. Not that either Hanley or his men were afraid of the outcome of such an attack. They had so often and so easily beaten off their enemies with the superior weapons they held, that no one gave a serious thought to the matter. Jamieson had organized the manufacture of a useful array of weapons from treated steel, which lasted long enough to enable the convoys to go and return with a considerable degree of security. His dispositions were rapidly made, sentries were posted, flares made ready, and the camp settled down for the night.

But Buddy Jones was for once as good as his word. Hanley awoke at dawn to receive a report that nothing unusual had occurred during the night. Scouts sent word that there was no hostile party in the neighborhood of their line of march, so after waiting until about noon, he set out with his convoy.

Their way lay at first through wooded country, but after a few miles they entered a more open terrain. It was here that the flank guard sounded an alarm, and Hanley called a halt. The reason for the alarm signal was soon clear. On both flanks there could be seen a strong body of men, marching with a disciplined tramp to the sound of a drum. They were marching parallel with the convoy, and as soon as it halted, they halted too. They made no attempt to come closer, and Hanley thought it prudent to avoid approaching them. One of the parties was led by a man on horseback, who could clearly be seen to be Buddy Jones.

After a brief pause of perplexity, Hanley gave the order to resume the march. Buddy Jones did the same, both parties keeping their distance. There was something sinister and vaguely disturbing about the throb of the drums and the steady march of the tribesmen. Sometimes they were lost behind a patch of wood or a fold in the ground; but sooner or later the beat of the drum was heard, and they were flanked once more by the enemy.

"Damn his nerve!" thought Hanley, with growing uneasiness. This was not the disorderly rabble of half-starved tribesmen

they had learnt to despise, but something much more formidable. If Buddy Jones's boast of a combination of the more ferocious tribes could be made good, they would be a formidable force. No more convoys, and then an onslaught on Bradley Parva as soon as Buddy Jones's ruffians were sufficiently trained! An onslaught in overwhelming numbers! Hanley's heart sank at the thought.

CHAPTER X

HOPE COMES TO THE LABORATORY

HANLEY and his convoy returned safely to the laboratory. They were greeted with more than the usual welcome that returning convoys received. It was plain that the laboratory was simmering with excitement.

"What's up?" inquired Hanley in the midst of a grinning crowd of workers, patting him on the back and pressing round him to grip his hand. "Have you discovered it?"

A loud murmur, half laugh and half cheer, greeted his question. "Not exactly," was the reply from one of the older men, "but, by gum, I think we are pretty near to it. It's that young feller Thompson's done it. We have had some wonderful test results. Don't run away with the idea that we've got it. But we're hoping, eh, men?"

A real cheer answered him. The men were eagerly mixing with the returned convoy in the main yard, and an excited hum of conversation filled the air as they exchanged news of Bradley Parva for the latest tidings of the laboratory work. Jamieson came hurrying down the yard to meet Hanley, and the two men exchanged a warm hand-grip.

"Glad you are safe back, laddie; and in good time, too."

"Glad to see you too, sir."

"What news of them all at Bradley Parva?"

"All well. The letters are being delivered now."

"Oh aye, and I dare say there is one, or maybe two or three, for young Thompson."

"They were saying Thompson had done the trick."

"Aye, maybe. It was this way. We were working along through a series of alloys using high temperature, high pressure, and high potential. My word, I'm a Scot, but it fair scared me sometimes to see the risks they ran, though the professor said it was safe enough. Aweel, I won't trouble you with details, but the veriest loon could see we were getting something quite new, something in the way of metal alloys that no man had yet seen the like of. But there was aye something, ye' understand. The metal wasn't just right, like it ought to be."

"Bad test results?"

"Not only that. They were good enough sometimes, and the co-efficient of resistance to molecular disintegration was improving all the time. But there was aye something. Either the metal was cold-short, or perhaps hot-short, or it wouldn't harden at any temperature or it became glass hard and couldn't be tempered."

Hanley nodded. "A bit of disheartening when you felt yourselves to be so near to the solution of the problem."

"That's so. The number of combinations to be tested was enormous, and even the professor began to get anxious about being able to hold out until we had worked our way through them. You remember we were worried about that, just before you started for Bradley Parva?"

"Yes, yes. But what has happened to alter that?"

"That's where Thompson comes into the picture. He had an idea, a brain wave. More than that, an inspiration. He's a dreamy sort of lad and he has a way of just sitting and brooding over things with his eyes fixed far away."

"When a man's in love . . ."

"Whist, laddie! I'm no saying he dreams maybe of that sweet lass of Dale's. But he dreams of other things too, and I think he's done it this time!"

"What is the new process?"

"Och, it's too long to tell you now. We'll go into it in the morning. That is, if we don't solve the problem tonight!"

"By Jove, Mr. Jamieson, are you really as close as that?"

"Aye, indeed we are. There's a crucial test this evening at five. The crucible won't be ready to pour till four o'clock, and the test pieces can't be ready before five. Ye may notice I'm a bit excited myself. Ah, it's been weary waiting all through the winter with one disappointment after another to chill the blood. And to think now we may be near the end, and I'll be seeing Maggie again before the summer's out."

HANLEY departed for his quarters and busied himself with getting settled in again. He was glad to be back again and

sense the feeling of order and security in the laboratory. It was a hard monastic sort of existence, and the absence of the feminine element was trying at times; but the disciplined calm of the community, under the rather frigid rule of Professor Murgatroyd, held a soothing quality of its own.

But today the usual calm was undoubtedly disturbed. One man after another burst his way into Hanley's room with news of the progress of the precious charge in the crucible, whose contents were to be tested that evening. At first he was inclined to drive them away with good-natured complaints at being disturbed after his arduous journey.

"Let me alone, can't you? I want to have an afternoon snooze and a good night's rest, before going on duty tomorrow."

"Good gracious, Mr. Hanley, you can't go to sleep now. Say, I believe we've got it. Come and see the crucible. There's something happening inside it. We've got something quite new."

"Nonsense! One crucible looks just like any other. There's nothing to see."

The man laid his hand impressively on Hanley's arm. "Listen to me, Mr. Hanley. I've been a steel worker, man and boy, for thirty years, and I know what I am talking about. That there crucible is going to give us something the like of which man has never seen. I've never seen molten metal behave like it. And I don't wonder with this high temperature, high pressure, high potential and high everything, that's being applied to it. And Mr. Thompson's catalyser added to it all. Come and see for yourself."

Hanley felt himself being infected with the prevailing excitement and tension. Grumbling a little, he put on his boots and tidied himself up, conscious as he did so that a thrill ran through him. Had the new metal indeed been discovered? Was the coming event of such tremendous importance to the whole world casting its shadow over them already? A shadow? thought Hanley with a little smile. That was hardly the word. If it was true, rather was it a brilliant, blinding radiance, that would illuminate the gloom into which the Trouble had plunged the human race.

He hastened to the foundry, noting as he went that the men had gathered in excited groups here and there, eagerly discussing the chances of success. For no particular reason, they raised a cheer at the sight of Hanley hurrying to the crucible room. Everywhere were smiling faces alight with a new hope.

If there was a hum of interest outside, it was doubly intensified inside the foundry. Only the workmen concerned were admitted, but way was at once made for Hanley in his capacity as works manager. An iron door gave onto the crucible room, and directly Hanley entered he saw that something unusual was indeed happening. The air was reverberating with a loud hum, whose deep diapason was shaking the whole building. The professor himself was there with a group of men, including Jamieson and Thompson. At the moment of Hanley's arrival he was looking through an observation hole in the side of the furnace. He was holding a glass screen in his hand.

Not a word was spoken until he had concluded his observations. As he stepped back and lowered the screen a subdued murmur broke forth. It was plain to everyone that he had seen something unusual. An almost bewildered expression lay on his keen features, as though he had seen a strange unexpected sight. His features worked slightly as he tried to control his emotions.

"What is it, laddie? What have you seen?" asked Jamieson, voicing the eager curiosity of them all.

"Gentlemen! I hardly know what to say. This is outside my experience. There is a process going on that I do not understand. We are on the brink of a new discovery, a new technique in metallurgy. The results we have been obtaining during the last week impel me to the hope that this crucible contains the new metal we have been seeking for so long. I cannot say any more. This evening's tests will show us whether our weary search is ended or not. I have high hopes, but we must steel ourselves against disappointment. I am sure you will all maintain your high standard of courage whatever the result may be."

"But, Lord save us, what have ye seen in there?"

"Look for yourself!"

Jamieson took the glass screen from Murgatroyd and went to the observation hole. He swung aside the cap which closed it, and a brilliant beam of violet light shot forth.

"One word of warning. Don't look for too long. Not more than a minute. The crucible is strongly radio-active, and it is dangerous to expose yourself to it for too long."

"Why, it's alive! It's like it's like naething on airth. Let me look a little longer! Why, it's. . . ."

Murgatroyd, watch in hand, dragged him roughly away, frowning a little.

Jamieson stared at him in awe. "Do you mean. . ? But it's no' possible! Not here in a furnace. It's not safe! Have ye thocht of that? Man, I'd run away, if there was anywhere to run to. But if yon living demon that I saw got loose, there's no corner of England could hide you from his wrath. Ye've raised the devil!"

A SHIVER ran through them all at his words. Were they indeed in the presence of something abnormal, supernormal, something seething with malignant life created by their unprecedented use of intensified natural processes beyond the ordinary range of nature? The level tones of the professor calmed them.

"Please be calm, gentlemen. I confess to an unwonted feeling of anticipation. We have indeed stumbled on something strange. But there is no need for too literal an interpretation of Mr. Jamieson's picturesque description. Those peculiar phenomena will disappear the moment we reduce pressure, temperature, and potential to normal."

"Aye, but will they? Ye've raised the devil. Can ye lay him again?"

"Have no fear. The process is complete, or nearly so. There are still three minutes to go. Stand by, please, to ease down in stages according to my written instructions. Is everything ready, Thompson?"

"Yes, sir. The electro-motive force will be reduced to zero instantaneously, as soon as you give the word."

"Good." Murgatroyd stood, watch in hand, awaiting the exact moment at which the process should be complete. He raised his hand and a hush fell over them all; then with a quick gesture he gave the signal.

There was a loud report and a blinding flash as the switches were flung over. The loud hum immediately ceased and the violet glare diminished slightly. Then the first stage in the lowering of pressure and temperature began. There was an indefinable, but unmistakable, relaxation of the feeling of tension that had held them in its grip.

"Take a look at the devil now," chaffed Murgatroyd gently, handing the screen to Jamieson again. Jamieson hesitated for a second and then grasped the screen and applied his eye to the observation hole. He remained so long, staring fixedly at the interior of the furnace, that Murgatroyd grew impatient.

"What is it, Jamieson? What can you see?"

"Aye, it's dying, dying," murmured Jamieson, fascinated.

There was a loud hiss as pressure was released in the first stage of reduction. A faint creaking proclaimed the lessening of the terrific stresses in the apparatus.

Jamieson passed his hand wearily across his brow. Hanley noticed his distress and gently guided him to a chair.

"Thank you, thank you. I'm an old loon. What did I see? It's fading. Hanley, I saw what did I see? Danger! Aye, danger to us all. I can't rightly remember. Have I been asleep?"

"No, sir, you were looking through the observation hole into the heart of the furnace."

"Aye, so I was." He knitted his brows in an effort to remember what he had seen. "It's gone. I canna remember a thing." He was rapidly becoming the Jamieson they all knew and loved so well.

"Don't worry yourself, sir. You said you saw danger to us all."

"Did I now?"

"Yes. But there's no danger. The high pressure has been reduced and the apparatus is in no danger."

"The high pressure? Do ye think that's what I meant when I said there was danger?"

"Of course. What other danger is there?"

Jamieson did not reply, and the fey look began again to creep over his sunny features, as a cloud steals the brightness and warmth from a summer's day. Hanley felt concerned for the welfare of his beloved chief, and he suggested going back to his quarters.

"Come, sir, it's tea-time. You've had a trying day; come and rest a bit before we return for the final test at five."

The commonplace homely words penetrated through the veil that was clouding his wits, and Jamieson smiled gratefully.

"My head's in a maze. Old age, I expect. An auld loon like me shouldn't go roistering and fighting. I must lead a quieter life, Hanley."

"I can't see you doing that," chuckled Hanley, gently piloting him out of the foundry. "You aren't the sort that ever retires."

"An argumentative old deevil, am I?"

"That's it, sir. You're noted for getting your own way. Can I come in and have tea with you? My own quarters are hardly straight yet."

In a moment Jamieson had forgotten his

passing mood and he became the solicitous host. The warm-hearted Scot upbraided himself for not thinking earlier of inviting Hanley to a meal, so as to give him time to settle down.

"Aye, and there was some yarn ye wanted to spin. Something about Buddy Jones, wasn't it? Come right in and make yourself at home. We can talk over a dish of tea as well as at any other time."

AS SOON as Hanley was comfortably settled in a deep arm-chair and provided with tea and toast, Jamieson told him to go ahead with his story. Hanley marshaled his facts and set out all that had happened when Buddy Jones paid his surprising visit to the camp of the convoy. Jamieson listened intently and silently. Hanley told his story well and there was no need to interrupt him with questions. Those could wait till he had finished.

"Well, sir, I think that is about all. I hardly know what to make of it."

Jamieson finished his cup of tea and began to pour out another.

"So the attack never came. Aweel, Buddy was not lying about that, but he may have been lying about the rest. He's a grand liar is Buddy."

"Of course, sir, that may be so. But. . . ."

"But what?"

"I got the impression that he was speaking the truth about the tribesmen."

There was silence for a space. Then Jamieson spoke.

"It's no' impossible. I'll grant that. Our standard of living was based on machinery, and when that went, civilization as we understood it went too."

"That's true, sir, but. . . ."

"It's no' impossible. And ye think it not unlikely? We'd better send out a scouting party to have a look round."

"I'd thought of suggesting that, sir. But anyway, we surely needn't trouble overmuch about a rabble of tribesmen."

"Rabble? The ones you saw were fairly disciplined, you said."

"That's so, sir. But they may have been only a bit of eyewash on the part of Buddy Jones, just to impress us."

"Perhaps. However, I don't think we are in any danger. What are ye smiling at?"

"Oh, only something you said a short time ago. When you said we were in great danger," replied Hanley apologetically.

Jamieson looked puzzled. "Did I say any such thing? I don't remember."

"It's of no consequence, sir. You were

With a shriek of joy, Jessie brought the club into action again and again.

saying we were in no danger from Buddy Jones."

"Aye, but I'll not be caught napping. If it is true, the convoys may have a difficult time. We may have to cut off all communication with Bradley Parva until we are ready. I can't spare large numbers of men for convoy duty. Dale will have to make shift without our help for a time. He can hold out."

"Unless *he* is caught napping. Ought we to send him a warning?"

"He'll not be caught napping. Never fear for that. But we must be ready as soon as we can. Then we can relieve him, if he is in danger."

"Get ready, Mr. Jamieson? How do you mean?"

"It's as plain as the nose on your face, laddie. If the test tonight shows that the new metal has been discovered we must set to work at once and arm ourselves on modern lines. Rifles and machine-guns, laddie. That will show Buddy Jones who's who. The plans are ready and manufacture can start at once. That's the first use we must make of the new metal. It's a mad world! We discover the most wonderful metal on earth, and the first thing we make is a machine to blow holes in our brother men. But it's common sense, isn't it?"

"Of course! We can't have a pack of blackguards overrunning England. That's a fine thought! Why, with a couple of hundred men armed with modern weapons, we can sweep England clear in no time." Hanley threw back his head and laughed joyously. "Just imagine Buddy Jones's face, if his gang was met with rifle fire! No more trouble over the convoys then, sir."

"I'm thinking the tea has gone to our heads a bit. We are going a bit too fast. The new metal hasn't been discovered yet!"

"No, by Jove. But hadn't we better be getting along to the test house? It's getting on for five o'clock."

"True. Another cup of tea? No? Then come along."

If there had been evidence of subdued excitement throughout the settlement during the melting of the crucible, it was doubly intensified now. The men were assembled in a dense crowd round the test house. It had been impossible to keep them at work, and the foremen had abandoned the impossible task and had sensibly given the men permission to take up a position where the news of the test could be disseminated immediately. They were laughing delightedly at a contest in repartee between two notorious wags, and had evidently made up their minds that their long vigil was over. They cheered loudly as their austere leader and his assistants passed into the test house, and there was a specially loud cheer for Jamieson and Hanley. Jamieson waved joyously at them and they called for a speech, but he shook his head.

"Wait till we are certain, my lads. Then ye won't be able to stop me from making ten speeches on end. Aye, ye'll be sorry ye mentioned the wor-rr-rd speech."

He and Hanley passed into the test house and the doors were closed. The hour for the crucial trial of the test pieces made from the contents of the crucible had come.

AROUND the great testing machine, towering over them all with its grotesque arms, a busy group of assistants concerned themselves with the preparations for tearing the metal rod asunder. They tried in vain to appear calm and unconcerned, but it was obvious that their nerves were at stretch. They concealed their emotions beneath a quick fire of feeble little jokes, greeted with entirely disproportionate laughter. Even the professor showed signs of agitation as he paced up and down the long room with his hands behind him; hands which clasped and unclasped themselves repeatedly. Yet a smile of confidence irradiated his face, for he felt confident of quite extraordinary results after the strange and unprecedented appearance of the crucible in the furnace. With the sure instinct of the born research worker, he knew that he was on the brink of some tremendous discovery, which would revolutionize all that had gone before. Thompson stood steadily at his post, awaiting a signal from the professor to begin; though outwardly calm, his heart was beating rapidly . Sylvia Metal, he kept repeating to himself, Sylvia Metal . . at last! An intoxicating rush of desire for his beloved surged over him. Jamieson greeted him with a smile.

"Sylvia Metal, eh, laddie?"

Thompson's eyes sparkled. "So you haven't forgotten. I hardly dare hope. What if we are all getting worked up about nothing? It would be awful."

"Losh save us! Dinna suggest such a thing! Still, I almost hope ye may be right."

"Good gracious, Mr. Jamieson! What *do* you mean?"

"I'm a lazy old man and I want a quiet life. If you have discovered Sylvia Metal, I shall have to get busy. All the requirements of ceevilized life to be manufactured. It's lucky I'm a Scot. I doubt whether any other man could tackle it. Aye, and the first thing we shall make will be rifles and machine-guns. There's ceevilization for you!"

"Not the first thing, sir."

"Indeed? And what will be the first thing?"

Thompson did not reply, but smiled happily; and Jamieson did not press him, for there was a stir of movement round the great machine as the professor ceased his pacing to and fro and took up a commanding position opposite the recording instruments.

"Ah, Jamieson, I'm glad you have come. And Hanley too. It is time to begin. As usual, there are two test pieces. The first to be tested will be the fresh metal. The second will have been artificially matured to represent a life of one year. It is the behavior of the second piece that we shall watch with interest. Though I fancy that the first piece may prove a surprise. All ready, Thompson?"

"All ready, sir."

"Then begin, please!"

The beat of the force pump in the corner of the test house began its steady throb. The great beam of the testing machine swung over gently, bumped softly into its stop, recoiled once or twice with a slow, dignified motion and then steadied as the strain came on. Thompson, now as steady as rock, moved the controls evenly and surely. The needle of the gauge began to rise with a faint trembling movement, while the pencil of the graphic recorder moved slowly over the chart, tracing a firm line.

Now the throb of the pump took on a deeper note, as the great balance weight crept out along its appointed path on the huge overhead lever. Ton by ton the strain increased amid a tense silence from the watchers. No need for comment on what was happening; the slightest movement of the dials held a clear meaning for all of them. Ton by ton!

"It should begin to yield now," murmured the professor as the pointer neared twenty tons per square inch. But a slight frown puckered his brow. "Strange! There is no sign of yielding."

Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. . . Still no sign of yielding. Twenty-five. Twenty-six!

"Stop, please," commanded the professor. "Take a measurement of extension at twenty-five tons per square inch."

An assistant applied his eye to a microscope eye-piece and adjusted a focusing screw. He gave an exclamation of astonishment and read out the desired figure. An excited buzz greeted the announcement, but it was silenced by the professor.

"Continue the test!"

"What does it mean?" whispered Hanley to Jamieson.

"It means that it's a verra remarkable material. Only one-tenth of the usual extension. But whist, man, look for yourself."

The pointer rose to thirty tons. Thompson looked inquiringly at the professor but he gave no sign. Thirty-one. Thirty-two. Thirty-three. The pump labored heavily but it was capable of much more than this, although its valves and pistons declared the intensity of the pressure. . . . Thirty-eight. . . Thirty-nine. . . Forty!

A cry of astonishment broke from them all, but the professor held up his hand for silence. "Continue the test," he ordered calmly.

"Stand clear everyone!" cried Thompson, and Murgatroyd nodded quick approval. Fracture, when it came, would be likely to be extremely violent at this high tension. They all withdrew to the shelter of an alcove, leaving Thompson at the controls. He was protected by a screen from flying fragments, and was in no danger. He called out the tension from time to time.

"Forty-nine. Fifty." A loud cheer greeted this. The men outside heard the cheer and roared in answer though they could only guess at its significance. "Fifty-two. I think it's going now. Keep under cover! Fifty-two point three. Point four. Point five. Point. . . ." He was interrupted by a tremendous report as the test piece parted. The great lever fell vibrating against its stops and the pump ceased its laboring note. The assistants ran out of the alcove and quickly prepared the machine for its second and crucial test.

"Fifty-two point five tons per square inch," exclaimed Jamieson. "Guid heavens! If you can give me steel like that to work with. . . It's most remarkable."

"I had an idea we should have some remarkable results. But, of course, everything depends on the second test. If the metal fails owing to greenish-blue corrosion, we shall be no nearer our goal."

In five minutes' time the results of the last test were entered in the records, the

graph had been detached from its drum, and certain measurements of the fracture were made. Then the second test piece was fixed in its place, and a hush fell on them all.

"Begin, please!"

ONCE more the great lever swung gently up and down before taking the strain. Once more the pump began its deep-noted beat and throb. Once more young Thompson manipulated the controls, his eyes fixed on the long-armed pointer. The onlookers hardly dared to breathe, as the tension rose from zero to ten tons per square inch.

"No sign of yield," reported Thompson.

Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteen.

Murgatroyd raised his eyebrows in mute inquiry, and Thompson shook his head in reply. The test piece held as firm and unyielding as at the start.

"By the Lord Harry . ." exclaimed Jamieson, but Murgatroyd raised a deprecatory hand. But even respect for their chief could not restrain an excited murmur from the assistants, as the pointer moved over its scale to record eighteen tons per square inch.

"Equal to British Standard steel before the Trouble," cried Jamieson. "Man alive, ye've done it!"

"Wait till the test is finished," replied Murgatroyd, though his voice shook slightly.

Thompson's pale face was flushed and his dark eyes sparkled. He flashed a quick smile at the professor.

"Sylvia Metal!"

The professor's features relaxed for an instant in a responsive smile at his chief assistant's eager face. Then he stiffened once more.

"Steady, please, everybody. There must be no doubt about the test."

"Hoots! Doubt? Why, man.

"Hush! Carry on, please."

The tension steadily rose. Twenty-five. Twenty-six. Twenty-seven.

"It'll go to fifty! There's no corrosion. It's as good as the freshly made steel," cried the irrepressible Jamieson.

Thirty! A loud cheer, which the professor made no attempt to quell, rose from them, and a roar from without answered it.

"Will I tell them ye've found it?"

"Wait. It can only be a few minutes longer. Remember we must examine the fracture before we can be certain. There must be no sign of greenish-blue corrosion before I can be satisfied."

"Man, are ye made of ice? Here's the wonder of the world happening under your nose, and ye talk about waiting till you are satisfied. Look, it's gone to forty now. Aweel, I'm satisfied if you are not. Forty-ton steel! That's good enough for me. It's better than the steel I was using in the Severn Bridge. Losh! The Severn Bridge! It seems as if it was in another life I had been building that. Aye, but I'll build it yet. Forty-ton steel! Eh, man, it's grand."

The test was concluded amid ever-growing excitement. Once again they had to withdraw under cover while Thompson remained at his post. A deafening report announced the parting of the test piece, that slender shining rod on which their hopes were centered. There was a rush from the alcove, where they had sheltered, to the great machine, now resting quietly on its stops, its task accomplished. Thompson disengaged the fractured pieces from the jaws of the machine and handed them to the professor. Not, however, before he had taken a quick look at the fractured ends. An expression of intense joy irradiated his ascetic features. The fractured ends shone clean and silvery, sparkling with a thousand facets like a precious jewel. No sign of the dreaded greenish-blue color which had so often dashed their hopes.

Murgatroyd took the broken pieces and examined them quickly. One look was enough. More minute examination could follow at leisure. For a moment he held the two polished rods of steel in his hands, while they all watched him in strained silence. Then he spoke.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen, I—I wish to announce . . ."

Jamieson sprang forward just in time as the tall figure of the aged professor tottered and crumpled up into his arms.

"Get the doctor, quick! It's just a faint, I think. Aye, his pulse is no' too bad."

They made him as comfortable as they could on the floor of the test house, and, by the time the doctor arrived, he was showing signs of returning consciousness. Jamieson explained in a few words.

"I see," nodded the doctor. "Great joy can have that effect. H'm. Heart's all right. Nothing wrong there, except age. He will be all right tomorrow. I'll get him to bed."

Then Jamieson strode to one of the windows and flung it wide. He was greeted with wave after wave of cheering. The

chief engineer was tremendously popular, and it was some time before he could get a hearing. The men knew what he had to say, for the great news had already circulated rapidly, and they were in a hilarious mood. At last he held up his hand for silence, and the men settled down to listen after a final roar of cheering. It was short.

"My lads, its all true. It's been weary waiting, but it's come at last. We've found it!. . ."

He got no further. Two or three bold spirits climbed to the window and seized the stocky figure of the little Scot, who laughingly abandoned himself to their rough friendliness. He was hoisted on the shoulders of two stalwarts and carried in triumph round the yard. The relief and delight of the men knew no restraint. Gone were all the gloomy forebodings that had assailed them from time to time during the long winter months. Spring had come and with it this glorious hope, this certainty, in fact, of early release from their self-inflicted captivity. Soon they would be marching to Bradley Parva to reclaim their girls, and to restore the joys and comforts of their former life. So they swarmed round the swaying form of the little Scot, as his joyous bearers staggered amid the swirling throng of rejoicing workers.

AT LAST exhaustion sobered the excited men. Breathless, they sat Jamieson down and allowed him to depart, after three rousing cheers from their parched throats. There was no thought of work for the rest of the day. Reorganization of their work, now that the new metal was available, could come tomorrow. For the present no one thought of anything but making a night of it.

Jamieson returned to his own rooms, where he flung himself into his arm-chair, suddenly realizing that he was intensely weary. The nucleus of his plans for the time when the new metal was discovered were already in existence. Tomorrow he would elaborate them in the light of the great discovery. Forty-ton steel! The engineer in him thrilled at the thought of such a material to work with. . . .

His reverie was interrupted by an urgent knock at the door, and Hanley entered.

"Come in, come in. A great day! Will ye join me in a little celebration?"

"Thank you, sir, but ."

"Say when."

"Good luck to Sylvia Metal!"

"Aye, here's to it. For-r-rty-ton steel!"

"Wonderful, sir, but . . . ."

"Losh save us, man, don't spoil this day's good work with . ."

"Oh, it's nothing about Sylvia Metal, sir. That's all right. The afternoon patrol has just returned."

"Well. Why do you look so serious?"

"They report that they could not carry out their usual reconnaisance owing to a large body of disciplined tribesmen. They said they were swarming everywhere. The patrol was not attacked, and they thought it wise not to attract attention to themselves by trying to force a passage."

Jamieson thought this over for a minute. "This confirms Buddy Jones's story."

"Yes, sir."

"Yesterday I might have been worried by what you have told me. But things are different now. We have Sylvia Metal. Soon we shall possess modern arms and equipment. We can laugh at Buddy Jones."

"Yes, if we can hold out against them."

"Of course we can. Our walls can stand a siege."

"Yes, I think they can. But there's another matter. It is useless trying to send a convoy to Bradley Parva in the face of this new menace. The convoy would be hopelessly outnumbered."

"That's so. Dale will have to be left guessing until we can march to his relief."

"Relief?"

"Yes. He will be besieged, too, by these devils. But he won't be caught napping."

Hanley's face fell. "Just when I was thinking of seeing my girl again," he muttered dejectedly.

"Hoots, man! Rifles and machine-guns made of for-rty-ton steel. Does it no' stir your blood? Aye, it's another race, and we'll win this one, too. Rifles and machine-guns! I had thought to take a rest till tomorrow, but we'll start now. Equipment for a force of two hundred men. Get your pencil and notebook, laddie."

Hanley flushed under the elder man's enthusiasm. His dejection vanished and he seized a sheet of paper.

"To hundred rifles plus thirty per cent spares. . ."

"I'm thinking, laddie, maybe we'll need . . Just pull your chair up."

They sat long into the night, with the sounds of the men's sing-song in their ears, working at the plans with which to meet the new danger. The early dawn came gray and chill before Jamieson sat back, tired and with a gray stubble showing on his chin, but ready for the last lap in their race against time.

CHAPTER XI

THE END OF IT ALL

SUMMER at Bradley Parva. England in August! Green pastures shimmering in a heat haze. Cattle cropping the sweet marshland grass and snuffing greedily at the rich, nectar-laden breezes spreading lazily over the river flats. Warm aroma from the growing corn, rising hot from the sun-baked fields. Tanned haycocks waiting their turn to be carted to the stack, and aiding their distilled sweetness to the ambrosial air.

"Paradise," murmured Sylvanus Dale, lying at full length on a couch of hay.

The silence of utter peace descended on them. "Damn the flies," observed Dale mildly, and covered his face with a handkerchief. Simpson smoked his pipe gazing serenely on Sylvia, who was staring meditatively into the middle distance. A faint throbbing came to them on the light summer wind.

"Listen," she said.

"It's only some of the tribesmen amusing themselves."

Sylvanus sat up abruptly and listened. "There has been a lot of this drumming during the last few days. I wonder if it means anything."

"Some festival or other," yawned Simpson.

"Daddy, is there any news?"

"From Birmingham? No, darling. I'm afraid we can hardly expect any until these tribesmen clear off."

A chill seemed to come over the splendor of the day. Sylvia sighed, and Dale exchanged a meaning glance with Simpson.

"Are you coming for a tramp with us this evening, Sylvia?"

"What's the use? We can't get far," she replied. A silence fell on them, broken by Sylvia who exclaimed impatiently, "What's the use of pretending? We are hemmed in, besieged. What does it mean? Why do we get no news from Birmingham? Daddy! Why don't you answer? Have you had some news that you are keeping from me?"

"No, no darling."

"I'm sorry, but—I sometimes feel I shall go mad. We talk of peace and yet hideous war is closing in on us on all sides. I know it."

"Darling, you mustn't get fancies like that."

"Then, why don't the convoys from Birmingham arrive as usual?"

"It's these troublesome tribesmen. Buddy Jones's gang. They are a wild-looking lot, quite different from Kennedy's lot, who were really quite decent fellows when you got to know them. You know our patrols are opposed by them, and they are in such numbers that we have to give way—for the time being."

"I'm terrified by those rough-looking men whenever I see them. They leer at us, as if they were enjoying some tremendous joke—at our expense."

DALE sighed. The glory of the day seemed to have departed, and his many worries and troubles began to close round him again.

"I think Sylvie is right, sir. I don't trust them. We know nothing about what is going on elsewhere. Buddy Jones may be looting and massacring all over the country for all we know."

"How dreadful! Simmy, why do you say such things?"

Simpson stood up and stretched lazily. "A natural love of horrors, I suppose." He laughed. "It was a silly thing to say. I think we ate too much for lunch and have consequently been growing morbid. I expect your father is right as usual, and the tribes will melt away somehow in the autumn."

"Yes. But meanwhile we won't take any chances. It's a nuisance having to keep on the alert day and night. It interferes with work on the land, but it can't be helped. Let's forget about everything, except that the sun is shining, the hay smells sweet, God's in His heaven and all's right with the world!"

"Come on, Simmy, let's join the others for a walk. Botheration take the tribes. We shan't be able to go for our favorite walk. Anyway it's too hot to go far. Let's suggest bathing in the river instead."

"Good idea!"

"Good-by, Daddy. Don't oversleep."

"Be off! I shall certainly compose myself for quiet—er—meditation as soon as I can enjoy peace and quiet. In other words, as soon as you have gone."

A renewed outburst of drumming, apparently from Six-mile Wood, assailed their ears as the young people moved off. This wood was now out of bounds, and patrols were turned back before they reached it. Sylvanus listened with a vague uneasiness which banished the gentle drowsiness that had begun to steal over him. He stared at the screen of trees as though he could penetrate the green cur-

tain of leaves and see what the drumming portended. As he looked, a large puff of smoke rose above the tree-tops and hung lazily in the still air. It was followed by two more and, with the ascent of the third smoke cloud, the drumming abruptly ceased.

Dale frowned in perplexity and half rose to return to the village. But he sat back again on his couch of sweet-smelling hay. What was the use of fussing? The sentries were on duty and the guard at the main gate was reliable. There was nothing to be gained by issuing useless warnings. Warnings? Against what? The tribesmen were apparently well-disposed. Dale closed his eyes. All was silent now, save for the drone of insects and the sleepy chirping of birds. Deep peace brooded over the sunny land.

The glorious day came to an end in a long dewy twilight. Simpson took his evening meal with the Dales according to his usual Sunday custom. And equally according to custom, Dale invited Simpson to accompany him on a final round of inspection of the pickets. Everything was quite normal and the usual Sunday evening hush settled over the village. Sylvia and Jessie cleared up the remains of the meal as quickly as possible, and while dusk was falling they busied themselves with lighting the lamps, not only in the house, but also for a certain distance along the lane on either side of the rectory gates, as provided in Scheme B.

"Curious, the Master still keeping up all these precautions," said Jessie, shouldering her ladder and moving on to the next post. "But there, I expect he knows best. Having to go armed after nightfall, too! Well, I don't mind that so much," she said, unhooking the wooden club which hung from her belt and swinging it once or twice. "I wish I could get a chance at those devils, that's all."

"Really, Jessie, you ought to have been a man. I believe you would enjoy the fighting."

"It does excite me, miss. Whenever there has been a fight, I want to go and join in. I get that restless when there's going to be a fight."

"You're a dreadful girl! Have you finished lighting your lamps? Come and sit outside for a few minutes. It's much too hot to go indoors. Where is Albert tonight? Will he be coming round?"

"Albert! That great gawk! No, miss, he won't be coming round. He is on duty at the main gate tonight," she replied, swinging her club round her head with a humming noise.

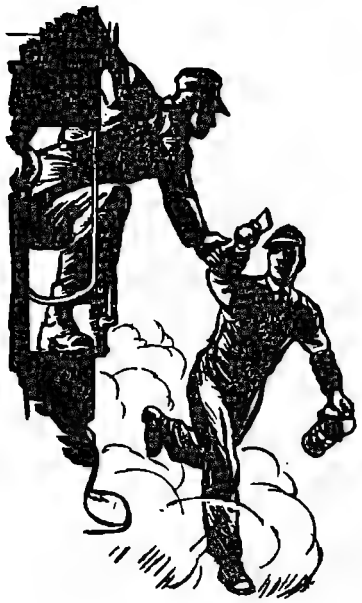
"Jessie! Do put that club down and come and sit quietly with me."

"Mustn't put it down, miss. Master's orders," and with one last vicious swipe at the air, she hooked the club to her belt and stood snuffing at the dew-laden air.

"Jessie, do come and sit down."

"Yes, miss. Sorry, miss, I feel so restless. There's something in the air."

"Nonsense. You'll give me the creeps. Everything is as quiet as a mouse."



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"Yes. It's so still, isn't it? You'd hear anything miles away on a night like this, wouldn't you?"

"I suppose so," Sylvia yawned. "What a heavenly night."

JESSIE plumped herself down on the grassy bank, where Sylvia was already reclining with her hands clasped behind her neck, and the two girls carried on for some time a good gossip about the affairs of the village. The name of Albert cropped up again and Sylvia told her maid it was high time she made up her mind.

"Yes, miss, but it's very difficult. I think a lot about it while I'm working and sometimes it hurts, especially when I think it's Dick. He's such a dear and he does say the most lovely things. Almost like poetry."

"You absurd girl!"

"But then Albert will wallop him again if I listen to him. It's very difficult for a girl."

"Nonsense!"

"All very well to say nonsense. You wait until Mr. Thompson comes. Then you'll see how difficult it is."

"Difficult? Why, it's all settled between me and Mr. Thompson."

"I dare say. But Mr. Simpson is big and strong."

Sylvia sat up, laughing.

"Listen!" Jessie said. "There it is again!"

"What is it, Jessie? You quite startled me."

"Something. . There's something in the air tonight. Listen! . No, it's gone. It sounded something like a motorcycle."

Sylvia slipped back into a more comfortable pose and closed her eyes contentedly.

Some animal was softly moving in the shrubbery, poor little thing.

She aroused with a start, hearing a crash in the shrubbery. Before she could rise, rough hands grabbed her. She tried to scream, but a cloth was flung over her head, stifling her frantic cries. She heard Jessie scream and she struggled as attempts were made to drag her away. She was young and strong and managed to make a strenuous resistance, though blinded by the suffocating cloth which enveloped her head.

At the first alarm, Jessie sprang up and seized her club. As a tribesman sprang at her out of the shrubbery, she screamed loudly and aimed a stout blow at him. He gave a cry of pain and came toward her again, but she held him at arm's length, raining blows on him, so that he relaxed his grasp. With a hearty round-arm swipe she hit him on the forearm, breaking it with a snap like a rotten stick. The man staggered back and exposed his head unprotected. With a shriek of joy, she brought down the club on his round skull, cracking it like an egg-shell. Wasting no further time on him, she flew to the rescue of Sylvia, who was being dragged away.

Surprised by her sudden onslaught, the two men who grasped her mistress were caught unawares. One of them was felled by a terrific swipe on the head from the maid, who was now translated into a veritable fury. She aimed another blow at the face of the second man, but missed him. With a curse he dropped Sylvia, and turned to meet the danger. It was difficult for him to see his assailant in the dim twilight, but he made a rush. Although Jessie had time to get in one shrewd blow, the very impetus of his rush overbore her and they went down kicking and fighting tooth and nail. He managed to seize her by the throat and began to choke the life out of her, in spite of the blows she still tried to aim at him. Blows which grew feebler as she struggled to get her breath under the relentless grip of her enemy. Releasing her throat for a moment, he snatched the club from her enfeebled grasp with a grunt of satisfaction.

Meanwhile Dale and Simpson had completed their inspection of the defense posts and were on their way back home. They were startled by Jessie's scream, followed by her Amazon cries as she fought her assailant off. Fortunately they were actually passing at the moment a lamppost with its crate of torches in readiness for night operations.

"Run, Simmy. I'll follow as fast as I can with a torch."

Simpson needed no urging and he rushed up the rectory drive, where he was at first unable to distinguish what had happened. But his eyes were accustomed to the darkness and he rapidly discerned the struggle between Jessie and the tribesman, after a few moments' bewildered staring. Jessie's strangled gasps guided him to the spot and he arrived in the nick of time. The ruffian, whose eyes and ears were sharper than Simmy's, released the girl and sprang at him. The tribesman's blow missed his skull and glanced off his shoulder. Simmy fell upon him in a fury, and it was the brute's turn to feel the relentless pressure of fingers on his throat. This way and that they swayed and staggered, the brute fighting like a wild-cat. But he was no

match for the gigantic Simpson, who held grimly on, forcing the struggling man's head farther and farther back, until his neck appeared likely to break under his sinewy fingers.

Sylvia had by now released herself from the enveloping cloth and sat trying to grasp the situation in the gloom. There was a shout from Dale, hurrying up with a flaming torch in his hand. The faint glow from the still distant torch was enough. With a cry of alarm, Sylvia saw the inert form of Jessie motionless on the ground, while Simmy struggled in the grip of a murderous enemy. She leaped to her feet, unslung her club, and as the wretch's head swayed past her in their frantic fight, she brought her club down with a resounding whack on his forehead. The man fell as if pole-axed, just as Dale arrived, panting.

Dale wasted no time in words, or in frenzied inquiries as to what had happened. It was obvious, now that there was sufficient light. Sylvia flew to Jessie and cried aloud in relief to find that she was alive and unhurt except for a painful throat. Poor Jessie could only croak a brief account of her share in the fight, and Sylvia, seeing her physical distress, desisted from further talk and helped the half-fainting girl into the rectory.

Dale stared at Simpson in dismay. "Tribesman!" he gasped. "How on earth did they get in?"

He was answered by the outbreak of pandemonium close at hand. Shrieks and yells broke out, punctuated by the shrill blast of whistles, while the red glare of flares and beacons signaled the alarm to the whole community.

"My God, we are attacked in force! Come on, Simmy!"

"The girls!"

"They know what to do. No need to worry about them."

"But . . ."

"Nonsense, man. There is no time for sentiment. This has been practised a dozen times. Look, there is Sylvia lighting the flare on the river bank. She and Jessie are all right."

THEY hurried to the scene of the uproar, where it was only too evident what had happened. A strong party of tribesmen had skilfully evaded detection and had made its way through the marshland, partly wading, partly swimming, and had flung itself on the sleeping village, effecting a complete surprise. Dale's defense organization was sorely tested, but it had not broken down. A patrol had come upon the enemy and had given the alarm; though heavily outnumbered, the patrol had put up a stout resistance and caused a number of casualties among the invaders, now dazzled by the flares, with a heavy fire of arrows.

The enemy charged resolutely, but every moment brought fresh reinforcements to the defenders. Half-dressed men kept arriving, and they plunged heartily into the fight. Gradually the isolated and desultory duels between small parties of invaders and defenders became concentrated into one battle, as the tribesmen were ringed round by resolute and disciplined defenders. But it was touch and go at first. Every man was needed, and when Dale and Simpson arrived on the scene, they plunged straight into the fray.

"Shoulder to shoulder, lads," roared Sylvanus Dale, laying about him lustily with his club. Simmy was by his side and his gigantic form ploughed its way through the enemy, leaving a trail of dead and dying behind him. The men recognized their beloved leader in the red glare of the flares and raised a cheer. They swarmed round him and, led by him, they hurled themselves afresh on the tribesmen, who began to give way. Fresh reinforcements arrived under a competent sergeant, who led his men to a flank attack on the wavering enemy. All was going well!

Panting with the weight of his years, Dale drew out of the fight and sat on a fallen tree trunk mopping his brow. Simpson went to him anxiously.

"You're not hurt, sir?"

"No, no, I'm all right. A bit blown. God forgive me, I'm enjoying it! What a fight! But we've beaten them off. Phew! This is worse than anything we have had to endure before. How ever did they manage to ford the marshes? I thought we were impregnable there."

"They are being driven back into the marshes now. The fight is drawing off. Shall we return to the rectory?"

"Presently, presently. The girls will be busy getting ready to tend the wounded, and the other women told off for this duty will be there by now. Our place is here. Good God, what is that?"

A fresh uproar broke out from the direction of the main gate. Again whistles shrilled their warning, and flames leaped skyward from the alarm posts on the palisade.

"Another attack!" cried Dale, rising energetically and hastening, accompanied by Simmy, along the village street. A woman shrieked as they ran that tribesmen were breaking in the main gate and they would all be murdered. At the guard house they found a single terrified sentry on duty, all the rest having turned out to man the defenses.

"They've got a battering-ram, sir, a tree trunk, and they are going to bash the gate in."

Dale and Simpson hurried to the palisade where they found an anxious sergeant shepherding his men. A fierce fire of arrows was being directed on the attackers, who were swarming round a huge battering-ram which they were preparing to hurl at the gate. If they were allowed to reach it, it was doubtful if the gate could survive the impact.

"Keep your head down, sir," cried the sergeant. "The air is fairly whistling with arrows. They'll redouble their fire when they are ready to charge. Can you bring up reinforcements, sir? I doubt if we can hold them alone. How's the other fight going?"

Dale quickly gave him information about the fight and the sergeant exclaimed with satisfaction, "Swum the marshes, did they? Cunning devils! Well, that's good news as far as it goes. Though, mind you, if they've swum across in one place, they can do it in another."

Dale sent Simpson to gather as many reinforcements as could be spared and bring them to the main gate. It was evident that the tribesmen were massing for the attack. They were clearly visible in the light of the flares and they exposed themselves recklessly. The fire of the defenders did fearful execution among them, but with shrill cries they suddenly began to rush at the main gate, a strong party in their midst staggering under the weight of a stout tree trunk. Undeterred by the fire of the defenders, they pressed on, fresh men immediately taking the places of those who fell.

With a shout of horror, Dale saw the battering-ram launched with an alarming acceleration at the gate. Roaring with anticipated triumph, the wild men surged forward in an overwhelming rush. Writhing forms, gasping out their last agony, marked their path, but this did not deter them; with an appalling crash the battering-ram struck the gate and a groan from the defenders rose when they saw their stout defense crash inward. The hinges gave way under the impact and one half of the gate fell flat on the ground. Shrilling their glee, the enemy swarmed through the gap, only to be met by a terrific fire from Dale and his men.

A terrible mêlée ensued, in which the disciplined valor of the defenders gave them an advantage over the horde of savage brutes. Yet in spite of this, they were pressed back from the gate, and things would have been settled then and there had not Simpson arrived with thirty men hastily gathered as best he could. These men poured a devastating fire of arrows into the flanks of the enemy, who, fearing to be cut off from their friends, sullenly began to give way. A valiant charge, led by Dale in person, drove the invaders back in confusion to the broken gate, where they became entangled with those who were still trying to press their way in. With a feeling of relief Dale realized that the situation was getting under control, and he drew out of the sight in order to organize a party to raise the fallen half of the gate as soon as possible.

But it was not to be. While he was mopping his brow and regaining his breath, there was a shout of dismay behind him, and three men came running from the direction of the village.

"Help! Help!" they shrieked. "Those devils have broken in by Fouracre Field! Thousands of them! Must have swum the marshes."

WITH a sinking heart Dale realized that if this disastrous news were true he and his men were cut off from the rest of the village. Confirmation came all too rapidly from two more panic-stricken men. The flares were dying down, since no one could be spared to replenish them in their desperate straits. Dale ordered a quick reconnaissance to get at the facts, and issued rapid orders for fighting a rearguard action to the village, and, if possible, to the rectory, which had long been prepared as a final rallying point in an emergency.

"Now, may God help us, for only His help can save us," he muttered. "Simmy, we must evacuate the women and children from their houses as we go, and try to get them to the rectory. Pray God that they have been warned there and manned the defenses."

"Never fear! We'll fight this out to the end! There must be a limit to these devils. They aren't numberless. We'll give them such a bellyful of fighting that they'll leave us alone for years to come."

"Simmy, come here. Come close. Listen! Swear to me now that, if we . . . if . . . I can't say it. My God, my God, surely not. . . . It cannot be Thy will." Dale buried his face in his hands for a moment and then drew himself erect again. "Simmy," he cried in a firm voice, "swear to me that, if necessary, you will kill Sylvia, rather than let her fall into the hands of those savages."

"Nonsense! We shan't come to that."

"Yet swear it! God help me, I could not do it."

"Neither could I. Don't talk of such things. Kill Sylvie! What of the other women? Bosh! Perhaps we shall go down fighting, who knows? Perhaps not. But don't let's get morbid about it. This isn't like you, sir."

Dale smiled wearily. "Something tells me that my dream of a new and happier England is being smashed this fearful night. I have dreamed dreams. Impossible dreams! And now I am going to wake up. I know it."

Simpson looked at his companion in surprise. Dale was standing with his face turned to the dark sky, a gentle resigned expression on his countenance. A sad expression of tired acquiescence and disappointment.

"Thy will be done," he murmured, and drew a deep breath. Then he squared his shoulders and became his old self. A sergeant came up, saluted, and announced all ready for the withdrawal.

"Good. I shall remain with the rearguard. Simmy, you go forward with the main body. Take the women and children with you, with as much food as they can carry. Nothing else. Give Sylvie my love."

A whistle shrilled and the retreat began. It was skilfully conducted, and the enemy were an appreciable time in grasping what had happened. The brief space of time was invaluable to the sorely tried defenders, and they were able to disentangle themselves from the dying fight round the gate without serious loss. The extinction of the flares, as the rearguard retired in good order, aided their disappearance in the darkness. For some reason the tribesmen did not follow up closely; perhaps they feared a trap.

The reconnoitering body, which had been sent to locate the fresh irruption of savages, returned with a puzzling tale. The tribesmen were there right enough in large numbers in Fouracre Field, but they had not advanced to take possession of the main village street, except in small numbers. The scouts had met these and had dispersed them without difficulty, driving them back to rejoin their fellows in Fouracre Field. There they were, massed in a large body, jabbering and making a great hubbub with their drums. The situation for the defenders was, however, highly dangerous, as they had to traverse the village street with this large body of the enemy on their flank. A resolute charge by the invaders, and a vigorous attack in the rear by those without the main gate, would probably annihilate the retreating party then and there. Still the minutes passed and the attack did not come.

Simpson maneuvered the main body through the village, evacuating whimpering women and frightened children from the cottages. Fortunately most of the cottages were in the main street, and it was only a matter of a few minutes to clear out each wakeful and terrified household. Dale and his rearguard worked along steadily behind the main body, maintaining communication with it and with scouts thrown out on the flank, whence an attack might be launched against them at any moment.

"A miracle!" thought Dale. "Why don't they attack? God help us if they do!

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Surely His hand is preserving us. It is not His will that we should perish!" His courage rose and he began to hum the "Old Hundredth." The man nearest to him in the darkness heard the familiar tune and flashed a quick smile.

"That's right, sir. Let it go, right out loud!" His voice joined the rector's, and after an instant's hesitation, other voices took up the melody. The litle body of men pressed in close to one another, and a loud chant rose on the still night air. The men were good singers, and soon they took up the parts of the chant in correct harmony, so that their voices mounted in the echoing village street, as though they were in a cathedral.

The main body heard them and raised a cheer in response.

Simpson's eyes sparkled with delight. "How like the splendid old boy!" he thought.

"Good heavens, sir," cried the sergeant, "just listen to that."

"I know, Sergeant. Rather fine, isn't it?"

"I don't mean that, sir. It's them savages. Listen!"

"What? I can't hear anything."

"That's what I mean. They've stopped yammering and drumming."

"By Jove, so they have. Is the attack coming?"

"Can't hear nothing, sir. I think we can make it, even if they do attack. We're nearly there."

"What about the rearguard? They have some distance to go still."

"Never fear, sir. If we can get all these poor women and children into safety, we'll sally out and bring in the rearguard. Shall I send a runner and get a report from the scouts?"

Before Simpson could reply a breathless runner arrived from the flank guard. Simpson and the sergeant quickly questioned him.

"But are you sure, man? They can't all have gone mad."

"Absolutely certain, sir. I was close up to them, watching them from only a few yards away, though they didn't see me. As soon as the guv'nor started his chant, they all stopped their jabbering and listened hard. The drumming stopped too. Funny, it was. They seemed all-struck of a heap about something. Then one or two started running toward the main gate."

"The main gate? What on earth . . .? They must have known we had abandoned it."

"Yes, sir. Then the blokes who had begun to work their way in at the main gate started yammering and drumming like mad, and the whole lot in Fouracre Field started squealing and running to the main gate."

"But—but . . ."

"I know, sir. Seems mad, don't it? When we were certain, I was told to come and report to you first, and then to the rearguard. I'll be getting on my way, if you don't mind, sir.

"It's a blinkin' miracle, sir, that's what it is. They had us cold, if they had pushed the attack home. What's bitten them?"

THE gate of the rectory drive loomed up in the darkness, and a cheerful murmur rose from the little force at the sight. The sentry's challenge was answered by a score of cheery voices. Torches flared up as they marched in, and the scared women were comforted by the sight of friends and relations, husbands and sweethearts, among the garrison; but there were others who sought in vain for their loved ones.

Sylvia was overwhelmed for the time with the work of organizing the refugees, but when the main body first marched in, she rushed at Simpson. "Daddy," she gasped. "Where's Daddy?"

"It's all right, darling. He's with the rearguard. They will be here in a minute or two. Listen!"

The "Old Hundredth," which had been swelling louder and louder on the night wind, suddenly broke out with a triumphant crescendo close at hand, and the rearguard swung in through the rectory gate headed by Dale, his grey hair shining silver in the torchlight, head and shoulders above the rest. The gate was quickly barred behind them.

Dale and Simpson rapidly organized the defenses of the rectory. There was no question of rest for any one of the defenders. They had no other idea in their minds than that a tremendous attack would be launched against them at any moment. The inexplicable delay in the onset of the tribesmen was as mysterious as it was welcome. A hasty meal was served out, ammunition was replenished, and there was even time to take a roll-call in order to arrive at an estimate of their losses.

Twenty-two men were known to have been killed; fifteen more were missing and must be presumed dead, since no prisoners had been allowed to fall into the hands of the enemy. There were twenty-five wounded men, of whom three were

seriously hurt; of the remainder, twelve were able to carry on, after being attended to by Sylvia and her little band of helpers. These losses were a serious matter to the slender forces of the defenses, and Dale grew grave as the excitement of the fight died down, and the sober certainties of their desperate state forced themselves on his consciousness. How long could they hold out?

The quiet of sheer fatigue began to descend upon the rectory, the silence only broken occasionally by a sharp word of command or a moan from one of the wounded. Sylvia sat in her chair nodding, as a wave of sleepiness swept over her, while Jessie, wakeful as ever, prowled up and down, brandishing her club now and again.

Then something obtruded itself on her consciousness. Something unfamiliar among the sounds of the night. What was it? She listened, straining her ears, but it was gone. Only fancy, perhaps . and yet she listened again. A sound she seemed to feel rather than hear . *tut-tut-tut-tut!* She suddenly remembered what she had heard or thought she had heard, just before they were attacked. A motor-bike. She listened again, hardly daring to breathe. Yes, there it was! Faint but unmistakable, throbbing on the stilly night. Boom! What was that? A new sound. . Drums? No, this was quite different.

She ran to Sylvia and shook her roughly. In an instant she was awake.

"What is it?"

"Listen! Rifles! Guns!" Jessie was incoherent in her excitement.

"What on earth are you talking about, you silly girl?"

"I'm not silly! Come and listen!" She dragged her mistress to the window. "Listen!"

Faint but clear, in the chilly stillness which heralded the coming dawn, Sylvia heard it.

"But it's impossible!"

"Impossible or not, it's there. Listen, miss! There! There again!"

"Why it's quite loud now! Have the tribes. . Jessie, I have it! It's Tommy! Murgatroyd! They've found it and they've got guns! We're saved! Where's Daddy? . ." She rushed out and almost cannoned into her father and Simmy.

"Ah, there you are, darling. I think we are secure for the time being. What a night! You must be worn out. But what's the matter, my darling?"

SYLVIA was gasping for breath. "Listen! It's Murgy! Tommy . rifles . . guns. Listen!"

For a moment there was dead silence, as they stood listening, and then there came an unmistakable rattle of musketry and a burst of machine-gun fire.

"Almighty God! Rifles and machine-guns! A miracle!"

"Don't you see? It's Tommy! Sylvia Metal! They've made guns and rifles and they are coming to the rescue. We're saved, I tell you. It's Tommy! He always said he could come."

The unmistakable boom of a field-gun reached them, and the beam of a searchlight swung across the sky. No possible doubt remained. The men in the beleaguered camp had heard these strange sounds, too, and there was an excited shouting from the sentries. The beat of running footsteps sounded outside, and an agitated sergeant-major entered in haste.

"Sir! Sir!"

"I know, I know. I've heard it too. It's incredible!"

"It's Professor Murgatroyd, sir."

"It must be! I can't believe it, yet who else can it be?"

"It's him right enough. Shall we advance on the main gate and meet him?"

"No. Take no chances. The main gate is open. They can walk straight in, if indeed it is Murgatroyd's force."

A burst of cheering came from the men. A tremendous noise, all the racket of a twentieth-century battle, broke out from close at hand. The repeated boom of field-guns assailed their ears and the flashes were clearly visible. The dawn began to break faintly, and the beam of a searchlight swung over them in the soft pearly twilight. Dale sat down wearily, suddenly realizing that he was very tired. Simpson went to him.

"You're not hurt?"

"No, no. Look, Simmy, the dawn is coming. The dawn of a new day."

"Yes. Murgatroyd will soon be here. That is, if he is with the relieving column. Perhaps Jamieson will be in command."

"The relieving column! That stirs an old memory. I remember when Mafeking was relieved. What is happening to us?"

"Are you sure you are all right, sir? Shall I call Sylvie?"

Dale buried his face in his hands. "I am a little overwrought, perhaps. I am rather too old for this sort of thing."

"Nonsense. You are as young as any of us."

"No, I'm not. I'm immeasurably older. Centuries older."

Simpson stared uneasily at his chief. The old man seemed to have aged considerably during the night. A bewildered expression, like that of a surprised child, moulded his usually energetic features into those of a mild and resigned saint. His daughter came hurrying to his side in response to a message from Simpson.

"What is it, Daddy? Everything is all right. They'll soon be here. Look, it's nearly daylight now. They say there is no sign of the tribes anywhere. They have just melted away like an ugly dream."

Dale shivered slightly. "'Melted away like a dream at dawn.' Who wrote that, my child?"

"Isn't it splendid? Tommy will be with them, won't he?"

"I hope so, child, I hope so."

"Daddy! What do you mean? Tommy will be there! Nothing can have happened to him. God would not be so cruel."

"Sylvie, darling, of course he is all right. There has been fighting, of course—I expect they have had to fight their way from Birmingham. . ."

"Oh, I won't think of such a terrible thing. Simmy! Why do you speak of such things? Tommy is there safe and sound. I know it! Simmy, Simmy. . ."

"There, there, darling, don't cry. We are all a bit outside ourselves. Reaction after the tension of the night. By Jove! What a night it has been!"

"Simmy! When they come, stay near me. You are such a dear. If he . if I have to be very brave. . ."

"I shall be with you, dear, then and always."

There was an excited burst of cheering from the men, and they could be seen pointing toward the main gate.

"Will you come and meet them, sir?"

Dale shook his head slowly. "I will await them here in my own rectory, where I have lived so long. I—I am hardly awake yet. I am a little tired, and I think I will sleep a little longer."

The sergeant-major came running. "A party of three soldiers advancing from the main gate, sir. Soldiers, and armed with rifles! Just think of that! The tribes must have had the surprise of their lives. Why, they'd mow them down by hundreds!"

Dale looked at him with his gentle bewildered gaze. "Mowed them down in hundreds with machine-guns. Yes. Common sense, isn't it? That's how the relieving column managed to get here."

"Yes, sir. Will you come and welcome the soldiers at the rectory gate, sir?"

"No thank you, Sergeant-major. I will wait here. I am tired."

A ROAR from the gate announced the arrival of the advance guard of the relieving force. The defenders swarmed round the three soldiers, frenzied with delight, and hoisted them on their shoulders. They were a corporal and two privates, grinning from ear to ear. They were carried in triumph to where Sylvanus Dale sat, with his daughter and Simpson anxiously surrounding him. The tumult aroused him and he opened his eyes, still faintly bewildered, as though newly awakened from a deep sleep; he raised his hand as though in an act of blessing, and a hush fell on the excited men. The three soldiers slid awkwardly from the shoulders of those who had been carrying them, and the corporal saluted after a momentary pause.

"Professor Murgatroyd's force, sir. The main body is not far behind."

"Is Professor Murgatroyd with them?"

"Yes, sir, and Mr. Jamieson."

"And Mr. Thompson?"

"I don't think so, sir. I haven't seen him for some days."

A low cry came from Sylvia, and Simpson laid his hand on her arm.

"Don't worry, dear. He only means what he says. He simply doesn't happen to have seen him. Is he with the force, Corporal?"

"Oh, yes, sir. He started with them right enough."

"Tommy will come a little later," Dale said. "He is not far behind."

"Daddy, what do you mean? How do you know?"

"Many things are clear to me now, child. Things yet to come. I loved your mother dearly, too. You will be very happy, Sylvie."

"Simmy," whispered Sylvia. "I don't like the look of Daddy at all. Can you find the doctor?"

"Of course, dear, if you wish it. But he is quite all right. He will soon be his old self again. I'm going now to the gate, and I'll bring the doctor back with me. Come on, men! Let's give the boys a real welcome."

As they left, a small group of men came hastening up the rectory drive. Murgatroyd, Jamieson, Hanley, and Simpson. Murgatroyd hurried forward, his hands outstretched as Sylvia rose to her feet.

"My dear!"

"Murgy!"

"By Jove, its nice to hear myself called that again. No one but you has ever dared!"

Dale opened his eyes, and his face was irradiated by a wonderful smile.

"Murgatroyd!"

"Old friend!"

He tried to rise, but Murgatroyd gently restrained him. Jamieson silently gripped his hand after a quick look at his face. Then he drew Simpson aside.

"Can ye get the doctor to come quick? Man, I don't like it. And yet have ye ever seen such happiness on a man's face? Away with you, laddie, and come back quick."

Dale's eyes were sparkling now with something of their old fire. He fingered Murgatroyd's accoutrements, shining with a silvery sheen in the sunlight.

"The new metal?"

"Yes. Tommy found it, and he's called it Sylvia Metal, the young scamp. He will be here in a few moments, Sylvie dear. He is with the rearguard, but I sent orders some time ago for him to join us. The tribesmen have cleared off completely."

"Run and meet him, my darling. I am in good hands now."

"Oh, Daddy darling are you sure?"

"Yes, darling, run along."

She hugged him affectionately, danced Murgatroyd round by the lapels of his coat, kissed him on the end of his nose, and then sped like an arrow down the drive. Murgatroyd chuckled, and Jamieson grumbled that she seemed to have forgotten his existence.

"THE new metal is wonderful stuff, eh, Jamieson?" Dale said.

"Aye, that it is. For-r-rty-ton steel, mark you, and rustless."

Dale sighed deeply. "Neither moth nor rust shall corrupt," he murmured.

"Laddie, listen to me. Ye asked what was the very first thing that was made of the new metal, Sylvia Metal."

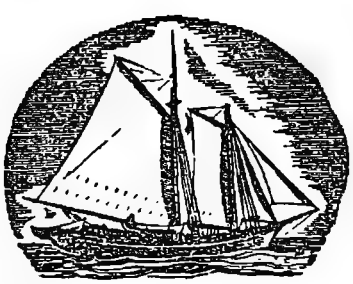
"Yes. Sylvia Metal, a pretty sounding name."

"Aye. Well, ye'll never guess what was really the first thing, so I'll spare ye the trouble of guessing."

Dale opened his eyes with something of their old twinkle in them. "I wonder if I could guess right."

"Not unless ye're a wizard. But ye're spoiling my story, so will ye kindly not start guessing." He laid his hand gently on Dale's knee. "It was that young scamp Tommy, that's going to marry your daughter. A good lad! He gave us all the slip the day it was discovered, the new metal, ye ken. Aye, and he sat up till all hours making a ring for his wife-to-be. So there's the answer to your question as to what was the first thing made. Not rifles and machine-guns. That was for auld loons like me to think of. Aye, and I'll wager it's on her finger by now."

A beautiful smile irradiated Dale's saintly countenance. "So! That was true poetry.



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I had half guessed. . . My dream! Will they make it come true? Merrie England! Sylvia and Tommy will build it anew. My dream!"

Murgatroyd's voice broke harshly. "Nonsense! The dream is over. We shall arm ourselves afresh, declare war on Buddy Jones, get into touch with others like ourselves. Our factories will soon be humming again."

"No! No!" A despairing cry came from Dale.

"I don't understand you, Dale. What is the matter? We have made the greatest discovery of all time. We will build a new England on the ruins of the old. . . ."

"That was my dream! You terrify me. Will the Machines come back?"

"Of course!" Murgatroyd's voice was almost contemptuous. "Your settlement here, for example. I noticed your ingenious but clumsy sluices as we came along. We can modernize your drainage system afresh. I'll harness the Severn and generate electricity with turbines. We'll revolutionize farming. Cheap power everywhere. . . ."

"Steady, Murgatroyd!"

"What do you mean by 'steady'? Isn't this what we have been working for?"

"Aye, aye, of course. But don't ye see. . . ."

"Efficiency! That shall be the watchword of the New Age. Efficiency! No place for the weakling and the slip-shod. A brilliant New Age, that shall outshine everything the world has everything dreamed of!

"My dream! My dream! A healthier, better, saner England. Sylvie! She's still in my dream and I can't reach her."

"She's comin'," Jamieson told him. "As fast as she can."

"She's still in my dream."

"Nonsense! The dream is over," Murgatroyd's harsh voice grated. "The world now wakes to a new hope."

"Or to a new despair!" The whispered words were scarcely audible, save to Jamieson, kneeling by Dale's side.

There came the sound of hurrying footsteps. It was Simpson with the doctor, followed by Sylvia and Thompson.

"My child! How sweet you look! So you are really there? Have I got back?"

"Back where, Daddy darling?"

"Back into my dream. Was it all a nightmare? How strange! I dreamed they had found the new metal. Tommy found it."

"Yes, darling, it's quite true. Here is Tommy."

The bewildered expression came over Dale's face again. "Tommy! My dear boy! But—my dream! Can dream and reality be mixed?"

The doctor looked at Jamieson with a puzzled expression.

"Is his mind wandering?"

"I'm thinking he is the only one of us that is completely sane."

"What does he mean by his dream?"

"The most real thing in the world."

"Rubbish! I detest these silly sentiments, Jamieson. This is not at all like you."

"Is that so? Aweel, perhaps then I'm daft."

"Daddy. . Daddy. speak to me! . . Daddy. . . ."

Simpson started forward, but he was forestalled by Thompson. With a muttered apology he fell back, and Jamieson gently led him aside. Sylvia flung herself on her knees and gripped her father in her firm young grasp, as though she could drag him back.

The doctor straightened himself and shook his head slowly.

"Daddy. . . . Daddy!"

"Best let him be, lassie," said Jamieson under his breath. "Poor wee lassie! Let him be. He's gone back into his dream."

"Lucky man!"

Jamieson started at Simpson's muttered words. "Poor lad. Come awa' with me. Aye, it's hard for ye. But there's work for you to do—you young ones. We old bodies are finished. There's a new England coming, and it's your task to build it—you and Tommy, with his sweet lass to help him, and all the others of your way of thinking. Aye, there's a grand England coming. . . It's a queer world. Claudius killed himself rather than face an England without machines. And old Sylvanus—heart failure, ye think. Aye, maybe ye're right—but I'm thinking he just couldn't face an England to which the Machine had returned. It's a mad world. . . . But ye'll build something new. It will be man's work, Simmy my lad, and you'll keep the Machine under control.

"Don't ye go letting old fools like me and Murgatroyd blather about efficiency. . . Sylvie and Tommy, there ye have it. That's the key to the future! She'll make her father's dreams come true, the bonnie lassie . . . machinery! Aye, there'll be machines, but they will be servants, and never again the master. Keep to that, Simmy, and ye'll build an England that will be paradise on earth."

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BEFORE I WAKE . . .

By Henry Kuttner

Brighter grew the vision that Pete saw of a land of beauty across the Seven Seas, and dimmer, more shadowy, grew the ugly world he lived in. . . . And all the while they called to him to come back, come back before it was too late!

THIS is the story of a boy named Pete Coutinho, who had a spell put on him. Some people might have called it a curse. I don't know. It depends on a lot of things, on whether you've got gipsy blood, like old Beatriz Sousa, who learned a lot about magic from the wild *gitana* tribe in the mountains beyond Lisbon, and whether you're satisfied with a fisherman's life in Cabrillo.

Not that a fisherman's life is a bad one, far from it. By day you go out in the boats that rock smoothly across the blue Gulf waters, and at night you can listen to music and drink wine at the Shore Haven or the Castle or any of the other taverns on Front Street. What more do you want? What more is there?

And what does any sensible man, or any sensible boy, want with that sorcerous sort of glamor that can make everything incredibly bright and shining, deepening colors till they hurt, while wild music swings down from stars that have turned strange and alive? Pete shouldn't have wanted that, I suppose, but he did, and probably that's why there happened to him—what did happen. And the trouble began long before the actual magic started working.

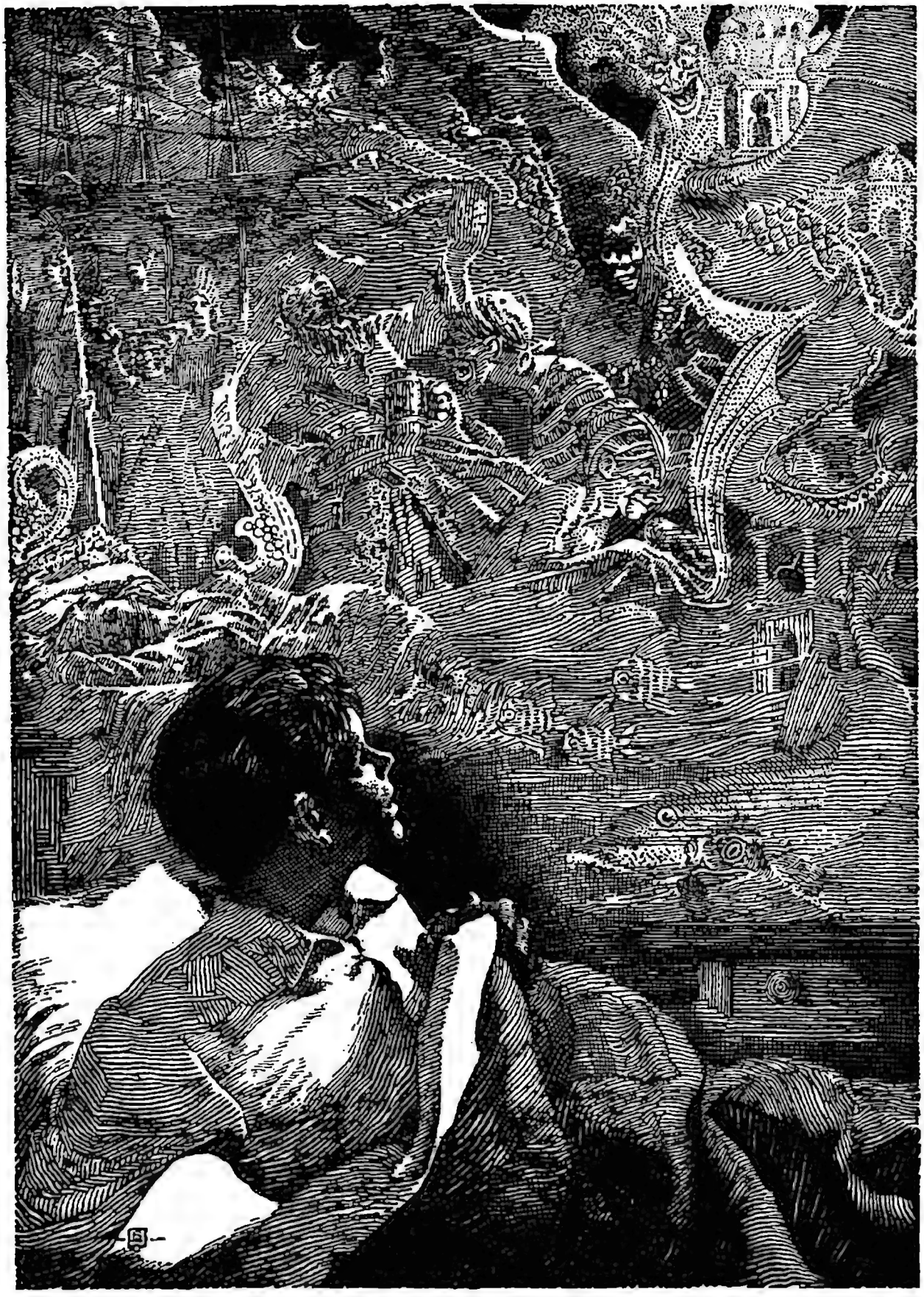
Pedro Ignacio da Silva Coutinho, with a name far too long for his thin, wiry, fourteen-year old body, used to sit on the wharf, looking out at the bright blue-green Gulf water and thinking about what lay beyond that turquoise plain. He heard the men talking about Tampico and the Isle of Pines and such, and those names always held magic for him. Later on, when he got his growth, he intended to go to those places, and he knew what they'd look like.

The Isle of Pines was Circe's isle, with white marble columns here and there in the dark green, and pirates would be dueling with a flash of clashing swords and a flash of recklessly smiling white teeth. The Gulf, like the Caribbean, is haunted by the ghosts of the old buccaneers. Tampico, to Pete, wasn't the industrial shipping port his father knew. It had palaces and parrots of many colors, and winding white roads. It was an Arabian Nights city, with robed magicians wandering the streets, benign most of the time, but with gnarled hands like tree-roots that could weave spells.

Manoel, his father, could have told him a different story, for Manoel had shipped once under sail, in the old days, before he settled down to a fisherman's life in Cabrillo. But Manoel didn't talk a great deal. Men talk to men, not to boys, and that was why Pete didn't learn as much as he might have from the sun-browned Portuguese who went out with the fishing fleets. He got his knowledge out of books, and strange books they were, and strange knowledge.

Up on the hill, in a little white house, lived Dr. Manning, who had been a fixture there for decades. Dr. Manning spent his days puttering around in his garden and writing an interminable autobiography that would never be published. He liked Pete because the boy was quiet, and very often Pete could be found squatting cross-legged in some corner of the little house, turning over the pages of Manning's books. He dipped into them, tasting briefly, racing on, but always pausing over the colored plates by Rackham and Syme and John R. Neill, with their revelations of a world that was too bright and fascinating to be real.

And at first he knew it wasn't real. But the day-dreams grew and grew, as they will when a boy spends the lazy days idling in hot tropical sunlight by the canals with no one to talk to who thinks the thoughts he thinks. And pretty soon they



Some day he'd be on his way to Cartagena and Juba, Juba where great processions moved with palaquins and purple banners to the clash of cymbals . . and to all the wonderful places that he knew existed, if only one could get to them . . .

were real, after all. There was an enormous map Dr. Manning had on the wall, and Pete would stand before it and trace imaginary voyages to the ports that fitted those glamorous pictures Rackham and Neill had painted.

Yes, they were real, finally.

Cartagena and Cocos, Clipperton Island and Campeche; he chased them down the alphabet he'd unwillingly learned at school, and they were all enchanted places. Clipperton was the haven of old ships. It couldn't be really an island, just hundreds and hundreds of the great Yankee clippers, with sails like white clouds, rails thronged with sailormen who hadn't died for good.

Not that Pete had any illusions about death. He'd seen dead men, and he knew that something goes out of a man—the soul goes out—when the lips slacken and the eyes stare emptily. Still and all, they could come back to life in Campeche and Cocos and in thunder-haunted Paramaribo, where dragons lived. But Paramaribo dragons could be killed by arrows dipped in the shining venom of the upas tree, which grew in a certain grove he'd discovered in a day-dream.

Then he found the toad. He was trailing his father, Manoel, one time, to make certain the old man didn't get too drunk and fall in one of the canals. It was Saturday night, when all good fishermen drink as much as they can hold, sometimes a little more. And Pete, a slim, silent watcher, would follow his father, darting through the shadows, ready to catch the unsteady figure if it lurched too close to the dark waters, or to yell for help if he couldn't.

Pete was thinking about a certain town he'd heard of named Juba, where there were—he could see them now—huge sleek black figures on golden thrones, and leopard skins, and he could hear the rolling of drums deep inside his head. His bare feet scuffed the dust through shafts of light that angled out from the windows, and discordant music came faintly from the Shore Haven down the road. Manoel had stopped and was kicking at something on the ground. It moved a little, and Manoel pursued it.

Pete edged closer, his eyes alert and curious. A small dark blotch hopped laboriously away from the drunken man's feet. Pete might have let his father crush the toad, but somehow he didn't, though he was no kinder than the average boy. It was Manoel's drunkenness that made Pete run forward. It was an idea, half-formulated in his mind, that a drunken giant could stamp out life into oblivion, and, maybe, that up in the starry sky were bigger giants who might get drunk sometime and send their feet crashing down on men. Well, Pete had funny ideas.

The important thing is that he ran in behind his father, sent the old man sprawling with a quick shove, and snatched up the toad. It was a cool, smooth weight in his hand. Manoel was yelling and cursing and trying to rise, but he thought that a coast guard patrol had run him down and tiger sharks were coming in fast, smelling the blood. Pretty soon he discovered the blood was only red wine, from the broken bottle in his pocket, and that distressed him so much he just sat there in the road and cried.

But Pete ran home with the cool, firm body of the toad breathing calmly in his hand. He didn't go into the shack where his mother was boiling strong coffee for Manoel's return. He circled it and went into the back yard, where he'd made a tiny garden by the fence. It would be nice to tell about how Pete loved flowers and had a bed of roses and fuchsias glowing amid the squalid surroundings, but as a matter of fact Pete grew corn, squash and tomatoes. Manoel would have disapproved of roses and clouted Pete across the head for growing them.

THERE were some rocks piled up near the garden, and Pete put the toad among them. And it was a funny thing, but Pete stayed right there, crouching on his knees, looking at the toad for a long time. There are little lights in a toad's eyes that flicker like lights in a jewel. And maybe there was something more in this toad's eyes.

You'll say it was dark in the back yard and Pete couldn't even see the toad. But the fact is he did see it, all right, and old Beatriz, the *gitana,* who knew more than she should have known about witches, might have explained a little. You see, a witch has to have a familiar, some little animal like a cat or a toad. He helps her, somehow. When the witch dies the familiar is suppose to die too, but sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes, if it's absorbed enough magic, it lives on. Maybe this toad found its way south from Salem, from the days when Cotton Mather was hanging witches. Or maybe Lafitte had a Creole girl who called on the Black Man in the pirate-haven of Barataria. The Gulf is full of ghosts and memories, and one of those

ghosts might very well be that of a woman with warlock blood who'd come from Europe a long time ago, and died on the new continent.

And possibly her familiar didn't know the way home. There's not much room for magic in America now, but once there was room.

If you're thinking the toad talked to Pete in a voice he could hear, you're on the wrong track. I'm not saying something out of the ordinary didn't happen. It's possible that the toad looked into Pete's mind with its tiny, cool, quiet mind, and asked a question or two, and it's also possible that a little magic started working there in that dark, fish-smelling back yard, with the tin-pan music of Cabrillo's bars murmuring through the night. But I'm not saying it's so, either.

All that happened was that Pete went into the house and got slapped for leaving Manoel. Margarida, a short, fat woman with worried dark eyes, said that Manoel would certainly fall into a canal and be eaten by barracuda, and Manoel's family, including Pete, all his five brothers and sisters, and Margarida herself, would starve miserably. She worked it out in great detail, gesturing wildly. Then the coffee boiled over, and she rushed to save it and then gave Pete a cup.

Pete drank it and grinned at Gregorio, who was trying to sharpen a gaff with all the dexterity of his six-year-old hands.

"The father will be okay, *minha mae,*" he told Margarida. "He is not so drunk."

"Pedrinho, Manoel is not young any more. You must go out on the boats yourself someday soon."

"Good!" Pete said, thinking rapturously of Campeche and Tampico. Perhaps Tampico did not really have magicians, after all, but the truth would be even more glamorous. Margarida looked at the boy and bit her lip. Well—*basta,* apron-strings have to be cut some day. It was not as if the boy were not always talking about sailing the Caribbean.

"Put the *criança* to bed, Pedrinho," she ordered, turning to the stove. So Pete collected Cypriano José, a chuckling, fat baby, and herded Gregorio before him into the next room.

In the dark, by the rock pile, the toad sat quietly, staring into the shadows with eyes that glittered like strange jewels.

For awhile that night Pete lay awake, his mind racing with vivid pictures of ships driving majestically through the oceans of the world. Someday he'd be on his way to Cartagena and Juba, Juba where heavy golden bracelets shone against satiny black skin, where great processions moved with palanquins and purple banners to the clash of cymbals and the mutter of drums. Cocos and Campeche and the Isle of Pines, where red-sashed pirates grinned in their beards and sang bloody songs. Tampico, where turbanned men called up afrits and jinn, and sleeping princesses lay in palaces of pearl. Clipperton of the white sails, Belém, where each white house had a bell-tower and the sweet chimes sang out forever in the peaceful valley.

Pete slept.

And then, somehow, the bed was revolving slowly. In Pete a dim excitement rose, and a consciousness that something was about to happen. As he slipped sidewise into mid-air he glimpsed rolling water below, and instinctively brought his hands together and straightened his knees. He cut the surface in a clean dive. Down and down he went, while his vision cleared and he saw, through a rush of bubbles, a clear, blue-green light.

He went slower and slower, turning his hands to slant to the surface, but not rising very fast. He had been holding his breath. Now, as a barracuda came nosing toward him through a forest of wavering weeds, fear made him kick out convulsively and he sucked in a gasp. He expected strangling water to gush into his lungs, but there was no discomfort at all. He might have been breathing air.

The barracuda swam up after him. One of his flailing hands struck the fish, and it darted away. Pete saw its torpedo body dwindling down the long, blue-green vista. Hanging there, automatically treading water, he began to realize what lay around and beneath him.

This was the southern sea. The colors that fade when coral is drawn out of its element were garishly bright here, intricate and lovely labyrinths on the bottom. Among the coral, fish went darting, and overhead a sea-bat, a devilfish, flapped slow wings past, its stingaree tail trailing. Morays coiled by, opening their incredible, wolfish mouths at him, and many-limbed crabs scuttled sidewise over the rocks and little sandy plateaus of the bottom. Groves of seaweed and great fans of colored sponges swung with hypnotic motion, and schools of tiny striped fish went flashing in and out among them, moving all together as if with a single mind.

Pete swam down. From a cavern among the brown and purple rocks an octopus

looked at him out of huge, alien eyes. Its tentacles hung and quivered. Pete swam away, hovering over an expanse of pale sand where the light from above shimmered and ran in rippling waves, his own shadow hanging spread-eagled below him. In and out of it many little creatures went scuttling busily on their underwater errands. Life here was painted in three dimensions, and there was no gravity. There was only beauty and strangeness and a hint of terror that sent pleasurable excitement thrilling through Pete's blood.

He swam upward, broke the surface, shaking water from his eyes and hair. The air was as easy to breathe as the water. He rode lightly on the rise and fall of smooth waves, looking about him. A forested shore lay half a mile away, across a blue, sunlit sea, and mountains rose behind the dark slopes. The ocean lay empty except for . . . yes, it was there, a clipper ship, sails furled, masts swaying back and forth as the vessel rocked in the trough of the waves. Its clean, sweet lines made Pete's throat ache. He could imagine her under sail, leaning forward into the waves, white canvas straining in great billowing curves, and the sharp bowsprit with its gilded girl's image driving into the spray.

The clipper lay at anchor; he could see the chain. And he could see movement on the deck. Perhaps. He swam toward the ship. But the waves were growing troubled. They slapped at him, slapping his cheeks. . .

"Minho filho! Pedrinho—"

And—"Pedro!" his father's deeper voice rumbled, with worried urgency in it. "Wake up!"

He felt a cool, dry hand laid on his forehead, and something warm and electric seemed to dart through his head. He heard words he did not understand, but they were calling him, summoning—

He opened his eyes and looked up at the little shrunken face of the gipsy, Beatriz Sousa. For a long, long moment her incredibly bright black eyes stared down at him, and the toothless mouth whispered a word or two more. Then she nodded as though satisfied and drew back, giving Margarida room to fling herself forward and hug Pete's head roughly to her capacious bosom.

"Ai-i! Pedrinho, coelzinho, my little rabbit, do you hear me? You are awake now?"

"Sure," Pete said, yawning and blinking as he tried to wriggle free. "What's the matter? Why was the Senhora Beatriz—"

The old *oitana* was stuffing strong black tobacco, heavy with perique, into her battered pipe; her eyes were hooded by wrinkled lids. She seemed to have shrunken into a smaller person, now that she was not needed in the house. She did not look up when Manoel gave her a resentful glance and growled, Your *mae* ran out and got the old woman. I say it is foolishness. Now get up, boy. At once!"

Margarida sidled into the kitchen, pulling Beatriz Sousa with her, whispering to the old woman to ignore Manoel. "He is a good man, Senhora, but he thinks a slap will cure all ills."

UNDER Manoel's baleful and somewhat bleary eye, Pete shucked his pajamas and got into patched underwear and worn denim shirt and trousers. He was hoping Manoel would say nothing. But a calloused hand reached out and gripped his shoulder as he turned to the door. Manoel scowled down into the boy's face.

"It is past noon," he said. "What sort of sleep is this? Your *mae* could not wake you. She came in crying to me, and *I* need my sleep." That was true, Pete thought, examining the telltale symptoms of bloodshot eyes and the circles under them.

"I hope you did not fall into the canal last night, *meu pai,*" he said politely.

"That is as may be," Manoel growled. "Now listen to me, *rapaz.* I want you to tell me the truth. Do you know the white powder that Beberricador sells at night, by the docks?"

Pete said very firmly, "I have never touched that powder, *meu pai,* or anything else that Beberricador sells. Never in my life."

Manoel leaned forward and sniffed doubtfully. "You do not lie often, Pedro. Your breath does not smell of wine, either. Perhaps you were simply tired, though—there is something wrong when not even blows will waken a sleeping boy. What am I to think?"

Pete shrugged. He was ravenously hungry and anxious to escape from this inquisition. Besides, what was wrong? He had slept too long; that was all. And Manoel was ill-tempered at being awakened while the clangor of a hangover still beat in his grizzled head.

"Come, Pedrinho," Margarida called from the kitchen. Manoel pushed the boy away and Pete, glad to be released, hurried into the next room. He heard his father's body drop heavily on the bed, and knew that within minutes he would be snoring again. He grinned, winked at

young Gregorio, and turned toward his mother at the stove.

"Pedro—" Beatriz Sousa was beside him, staring very intently into his eyes.

"*Sim,* Senhora?"

"Pedro," she whispered, "if you are troubled—come to see me. Remember, I can look through a stone wall farther than most. And don't forget there are many kinds of dreams." Her toothless jaws clamped; she hobbled past him and straight out the doorway, her black skirts whisking. Pete looked after her, baffled. He didn't quite know what to make of Beatriz. All this fuss because he'd overslept. Funny!

"You scared me, Pete," Gregorio said. "I thought you were dead."

"Do not use such words, spawn of the devil," Margarida squealed, spilled stew hissing on the hot stove. "Go and make yourself useful for a change, nasty one. Look, Cypriano José is at the garbage. Pedrinho, eat your stew. It will strengthen you."

Pete didn't feel particularly weak, but the stew was rich and spicy, and he ate fast. Afterward, remembering the toad, he went out to look in the rock-pile, but it had hidden itself somewhere in the cool, dark recesses and he could not see even a glimmer of the strange, bright, tiny eyes. So he took a home-made rod and headed for the canal.

On the way Bento Barbosa, who was rich and owned ships, waved a sausage of a finger at him and called him a *sonambulo,* so Pete knew that somebody, probably Gregorio, had been gossiping. He made up his mind to clout Gregorio's head later. But Bento Barbosa thought it was a good joke, and he twirled his raven mustachios and sent jovial laughter after Pete's retreating form. "*Mandriao!*" he shouted happily. "*Preguiçoso!*' Lazybones!"

Pete wanted to throw a rock at him, but he thought he had better not. Bento Barbosa had ships, and it had been in Pete's mind for some time that he might one day be lucky enough to sail in one of them, Cartagena and Cocos and Clipperton. . . . So he just went on walking through the hot Florida sunshine, his bare feet scuffing up the sandy dust, and thought about the dream he'd had. It was a good dream.

The canal was quiet. While Pete fished he was in a backwater where nobody else existed. He waited for the fish to bite, and wondered when he'd be on a boat, sailing out across the Gulf. Tampico and Juba called him, and he heard the thunder rolling, heavy and ominous, above Paramaribo, where dragons lived. Mailed in shining green and silver they swept in sinuous flight against the blue, their enormous wings darkening the sun, their scaly armor clashing. And Campeche, and the Isle of Pines with its marble temples and its laughing, bearded pirates. Well, and there was Cartagena too, and Cadiz and Cochabambo, and all the enchanted ports. They were real enough to young Pedro Ignacio da Silva Coutinho, and his brown toes wriggled with excitement above the still green water of the canal.

Oh, nothing much happened to Pete that Sunday. He sauntered home in the evening, his head full of shining pictures, and he heard little of the noisy family life boiling around him as he ate his supper.

Out in the stone-pile the toad squatted with its glowing jewel-eyes and, maybe, its memories. I don't know if you'll admit a toad could have memories. But I don't know, either, if you'll admit there was once witchcraft in America. Witchcraft doesn't sound sensible when you think of Pittsburgh and subways and movie houses, but the dark lore didn't start in Pittsburgh or Salem either; it goes away back to dark olive groves in Greece and dim, ancient forests in Brittany and the stone dolmens of Wales. All I'm saying, you understand, is that the toad was there, under its rocks, and inside the shack Pete was stretching on his hard bed like a cat and composing himself to sleep.

And this time the bed began to revolve right away, and spilled him out into darkness. He was expecting it, somehow. He didn't worry about being able to breathe now, he just relaxed and let himself sink, while his eyes accustomed themselves to the green gloom. It wasn't gloom at all, really. There were lights and colors. If it hadn't been for the feel of the water gliding by against his skin he might have imagined himself up in the sky, with meteors and comets blazing past. But these were sea-things, shining in the dark, the luminous life that blazes beneath the southern sea.

First he'd see a tiny twinkling speck, like a star, and it might have been next to his face or a mile away, in that immense, featureless void, with its faint hint of green. It would grow larger. It would turn into a radiant sun of purple or crimson or orange and come rushing at him, and swerve aside at the last moment. There were sinuous ribbons of fire that coiled into bright patterns, and there were

schools of tiny fish that flashed by like sparks. Down below, in the deeper abyss, the colors were paler, and once an enormous shape blundered past down there, like the sea-bottom itself moving heavily. Pete watched awhile and then swam up.

UNDER a thin new moon the sea lay quivering with silver. Beyond him was the silent isle, and a rakish, sweet silhouette hung at anchor in the lagoon, the Yankee clipper, its bowsprit pointing now at the sky, now at the sea. To and fro it rocked, and Pete, rising and falling upon the same rhythm, was glad that he shared the waves with that lovely shape. Pete knew ships and loved them, and this was a dream of a ship. What he wanted more than anything was to see her under sail, with white canvas straining full of the breeze and a creamy wake parting behind her stern.

He began to swim toward the silent clipper, and he was almost at the anchor chain when a marlin drove up to the surface and tore at him, and a stabbing pain went through his arm. The marlin had a man's face. It was very serious and thoughtful, and it was holding a glass tube tipped with a long sharp needle, and it wasn't a marlin after all. It was old Dr. Manning, come down from his little hilltop house.

There was a strange taste under Pete's tongue. He blinked up at Margarida's worried fat face. *"Minha mae—"* he said, puzzled.

"Thank the good God!" Margarida cried, enfolding Pete in a hysterical hug. "My Pedrinho—*ai-i gracas—"*

"Thank the good *doutor,* rather," Manoel said grumpily, but he too looked troubled. Margarida didn't hear. She was busy smoothing Pete's hair and then mussing it up again, and Pete didn't know what the fuss was all about. Dr. Manning was snapping his black bag shut. He blinked doubtfully at Pete, and then sent Margarida and Manoel out of the room. After that he sat down on the bed and asked Pete questions.

It was always easy to talk to Dr. Manning, and Pete explained about the pirate islands with their magical names, and about the southern sea and the ship. It was a wonderful dream, Pete said, watching the *doutor's* puzzled eyes. He hadn't been taking any drugs, no. Manning was especially inquisitive on that point. Finally he told Pete to stay in bed awhile, and went into the kitchen. Though he kept his voice low out there, Gregorio managed to slide the door open a crack, and Pete could hear what was being said. He didn't understand all of it.

Dr. Manning said he'd thought at first it might be sleeping sickness, or even narcolepsy, whatever that was, but—no, Pete was healthy enough physically. Manoel growled that the boy was bone-lazy, spending his time fishing and reading. Reading! No good could come of such things.

"In a way you're right, Manoel," Dr. Manning said hesitantly. "It's natural for a boy to day-dream now and then, but I think Pedro does it too much. I've let him use my library whenever he wanted, but it seems . . . h'm . it seems he reads the wrong things. Fairy tales are very charming, but they don't help a boy to cope with real life."

"Com certeza," Manoel agreed. "You mean he has crazy ideas in the head."

"Oh, they're rather nice ideas," Dr. Manning said. "But they're only fairy tales, and they're beginning to seem true to Pete. You see, Manoel, there are really two worlds, the real one, and the one you make up inside your mind. Sometimes a boy—or even a man—gets to like his dream world so much he just forgets about the real one and lives in the one he's made up."

"I know," Manoel said. "I have seen some who do that. It is a bad thing."

"It would be bad for Pete. He's a very sensitive boy. If you live too much in dreams, you can't face real life squarely. And Pete will have to work for his living."

"But he is not sick?" Margarida put in anxiously.

"No. He's thinking the wrong way, that's all—for him. He should get out and have more interests, see what the world's really like. He ought to go to Campeche and Tampico and all these other places he makes up dreams about, and see them as they really are."

"Ah," Manoel said. "If he could go out on the boats, perhaps—"

"Something of the sort." Dr. Manning nodded. 'If he could go on the *Princesa,* for instance, tomorrow. She's bound to Gulf ports, and Pete might ship as a cabin boy or something. The change and contacts would be just what he needs."

Manoel clapped his hands together. "Bento Barbosa owns part of the *Princesa.* I will talk to him. Perhaps it can be arranged."

"It would be best for Pete," Dr. Manning said, and that was the end of the conversation, except that Pete lay quivering with

excitement at the prospect of seeing the Gulf ports at last.

He went to sleep again, but he did not dream this time. It was a lighter slumber, and he drowsed for hours, waking once in awhile as voices came to him. Manoel, in the kitchen, was talking angrily, while Margarida tried to quiet him.

Slap! and Gregorio began to wail. "You will keep your tongue still after this!" Manoel shouted. "There is no need to run gossiping down the street. This is a private matter."

"He is only a *menino,*" Margarida pleaded, but Manoel roared at her angrily.

"His tongue wags night and day! Just now Bento Barbosa asked me what was wrong with Pedro and said he could not send a sick boy on the *Princesa.* I had to talk to him a long time before he would agree to take Pedro. There must be no more of these—these—" Manoel cursed. "It is too hot here in Cabrillo and the air is bad. Once Pedro is out on the water he will freshen up. *Deus,* do you think I would send him away if he were really sick, woman?"

A door slammed and there was silence. Pete dozed again, and remembered Cocos and Cartagena, and the dragons sailing over Paramaribo, and finally he decided he was awake. So he got up, drank the coffee Margarida forced on him, and went out. His arm was still sore from Dr. Manning's hypodermic needle.

He took a circuitous route to avoid passing Bento Barbosa's store, and this brought him past the *gitana's* gate. The old woman called to him, and he couldn't pretend he hadn't heard; you couldn't fool Beatriz Sousa's sharp black eyes. So he went uneasily into the garden and up to the porch, where the Senhora sat shuffling the tarots on a flimsy table.

"Sit down, Pedro," she said pointing to the creaky cane chair opposite her. "How are your dreams today, *meus neto?*"

It was funny that she'd never called him grandson before. It was funny, too, that she hadn't once looked up at him since he'd opened the gate. The wise, bright eyes were focused on the cards as they slapped softly down. Flick—flick—and a nod; flick, flick, and now the silvery head lifted and the bright black eyes looked straight into Pete's.

"A long time ago I lived in Lisbon," she said, in softly slurred Portuguese that made the name of the city *Leesh-boa.* "But before that, *meus neto,* my tribe was in the mountains where there are only old things, like the trees and the rocks and the streams. There are truths to be learned from the old things—" She hesitated, and her brown, shrunken claw closed over Pete's hand. "Do you know the truth, Pedrinho?"

Puzzled, he met her bright stare. "The truth about what, Senhora?"

A moment longer she searched his eyes. Then her hand dropped and she smiled.

"No. Never mind. I see you do not. I had thought perhaps you might need advice from me, but I see you need nothing. You are safe, *menino.* The old magic is not all evil. It may be very bad for men in towns, but a gift is not offered to one who had no use for it."

Pete did not understand, but he listened politely. "*Sim,* Senhora?"

"You must decide," she said with a shrug of her narrow shoulders. "You need no help from me or anyone. Only remember this—you have no need to be afraid, Pedro, never at all." The toothless jaws worked. "No, do not look at the tarots. I will not read your future for you. Your future. . . ." She mumbled something in the gipsy tongue. "Go away now. Go."

Pete, feeling that he had somehow offended the old woman, got up reluctantly. She did not look after him as he stepped down from the porch.

EVEN when he got home that evening and found Margarida busy packing the gear that he would need and hovering between pride and tears, he could not quite believe all this was for Pedro Ignacio da Silva Coutinho. Manoel superintended, sitting by the stove and scornfully rejecting dozens of articles his wife wanted to put in the sea-bag. The children were delirious with excitement, and neighbors kept dropping in with good advice. Within an hour Pete had been given twenty assorted crucifixes, charms and amulets, all designed to protect him from the dangers of the sea. Manoel snorted.

"A strong back and a quick eye are better," he declared.

Margarida threw her apron over her head suddenly and burst into sobs. "He is not well," she wept. "He will die, I know."

"You are a fool," Manoel told her. "The *doutor* said Pedro is healthy as a jackass, and as for you, stop acting like one and bring me more wine.

As for Pete, he went out into the yard and looked around it with new eyes, now

that he was leaving. All the ports of the world lay open to him, Tampico and Campeche and a thousand more, and the pirates were singing on the Isle of Pines, and over Paramaribo the dragons were flying with their mailed and clashing wings.

When Pete went to bed that night he was quite sure he wouldn't oversleep again. Not with the ports of the world beckoning to him. Through the open window beside him came the faint sound of song and music from the Castle and the other waterfront taverns, the last sounds he would hear from little Cabrillo on the Gulf before he sailed away on the *Princesa* into a beckoning world.

What he'd find there, of course, was up to Pete. But he was sure there were magicians in Tampico and leopard-skins and golden thrones in Juba. Dragons and pirates and white temples where magic dwelt. And best of all, the places he didn't know about yet, the ones that would come as surprises. Oh, not entirely pleasant surprises. There should be a hint of peril, a touch of terror, to emphasize the brightness of adventure.

Tampico . Tampico Juba and Campeche Paramaribo Cocos and Clipperton and Cartagena. . . . They blended into a singing silence in his mind.

In the dark stones the toad sat breathing softly, its eyes looking not at the night, but at something far away.

In a blue brightness Pete went whirling and spinning down, the southern sea taking him eagerly to its depths. Below, the coral blazed with rich colors, and a tiger-shark curved away and was gone.

He swam upward. His head broke the surface and the blue sea lay under a blue sky, cradling the forested isle in the immense plain of waters. Beyond the lagoon lay the clipper ship. A rattling and a clanking came to Pete's ears. The anchor was rising, white sails mounting on the masts. The wind caught the canvas and billowed them, and the ship heeled over a little as they filled taut and strained against the blue.

The ship was sailing.

Sudden desolation struck through Pete. He was afraid, abruptly, of being left alone on this enchanted ocean. He didn't want to watch the clipper dwindle to a speck on the horizon. With desperate haste he began to swim toward the vessel.

In the translucent blue depths beneath him bright shapes moved. A school of dolphins broke the surface with their precise, scalloping play all about him. Showering silver rolled from their sleek hides as they leaped. But ever the rattling of the anchor chain grew louder.

Almost articulate . . . almost understandable . altering to a harsh voice that commanded—what?

Waken—waken.

Waken to morning in Cabrillo, Pedrinho; waken to the tide that will take the *Princesa* out across the Gulf. You must go with the tide. You must see Tampico and Campeche. You must look upon the real Tampico, with its black oil-tankers in the oily water. You must see the ports of the world, and find in them what men always find. . . So waken, Pedro, waken as your father's hand closes on your shoulder and shakes you out of your dream.

Not for you, Pedro.

Out of nowhere, a cool, small, inhuman voice said softly, "A gift is offered, Pedro. The old magic is not all evil. Reach up quickly, Pedro, reach up—"

Pete hesitated. The ports of the world—he knew how wonderful they were to see, and the *Princesa* would be waiting for him. But the chain of the clipper's anchor was almost within reach. He heard the cool little voice, and he gave one more strong stroke in the water and reached up with both hands. The slippery wet surface of the anchor-chain met his dripping palms. He was drawn up out of the sea.

Behind him voices faded. He thought he could hear dimly his mother's cry, and the shrill tones of little Gregorio. But they dwindled and were gone in a new sound from deck, the sound of deep song rising above the shuffle of bare feet.

"As I was a-walkin' down Paradise Street. . ."

Hands were helping him over the rail. He saw grinning sailors pacing around the capstan, bending above the bars, singing and singing. He felt the sun-warmed deck beneath his feet. Overhead canvas creaked and slapped and the ship came alive as wind took hold of the sails and billowed them out proudly, casting sudden translucent shadows over the deck and the grinning men. The clipper's bowsprit dipped once, twice, and spray glittered like diamonds on the gilded figurehead. He heard deep, friendly voices that drowned out the last faint, dying summons from—from—he could not remember.

Thunder rolled deeply. Pete looked up.

Mailed in shining armor, its tremendous wings clashing, a dragon swept through the sunlit air above Paramaribo.

(Continued from page 6)

Plesiosaurs and the hesperornis ran out, as he admits, millions of years before man appeared on Earth, let alone in southern California, but there is absolutely no reason to backtrack on many of the Pleistocene species. A recent account in "Harpers", reprinted in "Readers Digest", has perhaps made this fact clear to most readers now.

There is now—as there was not when "Day of the Brown Horde" was written—plentiful good evidence that men were in the Americas early enough to hunt now extinct animals: the mammoth, possibly the mastodon, the long-horned bison, the giant sloth, the native horse and camel, and from the Alaskan evidence given in the article I have mentioned, quite probably some of the great carnivores. There have been suggestions from the Argentine that early man there may have penned up the giant sloth and kept it alive in a semi-domesticated way, though this is still in the "not proven" category. There is also, of course, the possibility that some of these extinct creatures persisted until very recent times—particularly since nobody seems to be able to suggest why they should have died out.

"Day of the Brown Horde" is indeed a classic, and I was very glad to read it again. I have also been glad to find that your Dunsany reprints have thus far been from the only two of his books which I have never seen. There are stories as good or better in other books of his; are they barred because they may have appeared in English magazaines? And is there any possibility of your using the original Sime illustrations?

These "available in every library" arguments don't carry much weight with me, and you could do worse than try an occasional Haggard —particularly if you were to start working your way through the long Allan Quatermain series in roughly their chronological order, beginning with "Allan and the Ice Gods" and "The Ancient Allan". In the five or ten years that it will take you to work your way through, the more familiar yarns won't be so familiar. And you have a gold mine in Taine.

P. SCHUYLER MILLER

108 Union St.
Schenectady 5, N. Y.

"CLYNE IS WONDERFUL"

My friend, Thyril Ladd, numbers a copy of Cutcliffe Hyne's "The Lost Continent" among the others of his large Fantasy collection; and he has been dropping me little hints as to how good it is. So I had a sharpened appetite, as you might say, when I walked up to the stand and picked up a copy of my favorite Fantasy magazine.

The lady on the cover dulled said appetite not a whit. Really, a wonderful bit of painting! Lawrence is indeed fine. Though I would have liked the figure to be smaller, and the buildings of Atlantis to show up more in the background a small matter, though.

All I can say about the Atlantis classic is, Thyril Ladd was indeed correct. It had more actual Fantasy in it than Tooker's tale, and is, I believe, just a little bit better, as to writing style. It is certainly a tale of breathless interest, and then some.

There is no need for me to compliment the Dunsany tale. I spoke my mind on Dunsany last issue, and everything I said goes for this one, though I liked "The Postman of Otford" better, I think, than I did "The Highwayman." Oh, but it was marvelous! More of Dunsany . . . how about his plays, as I suggested? "The Gods Of The Mountain" or "The Eye Of Klesh" would be excellent.

The interior illustrations . well, this Lawrence is next to Finlay in my estimation . . and *that's* mighty high! Pages 25, 43, 59 and 95 especially delighted me. Indeed, I am beginning to rate Lawrence's interior work (his best ones) *with* Finlay's but he can never equal V.F. on covers.

Not for nothing is Virgil Finlay called The Cover Master.

And Clyne . well, this boy is *wonderful!!* Really, his illustrations for the Dunsany tales are as good as a Lawrence's, better than many of Bok's that I have seen, and almost as good as some of Finlay's work . better than the regrettable pictures Finlay did for "Ark of Fire", for instance.

More Clyne.

For next issue, I am awaiting "The Machine Stops" with something of curiosity, and something of apprehension. I know, *all* F.F.M. material is good but is Wayland Smith's tale a book reprint, or a new story? Please, though, I want to see more new novelettes and shorts. I don't think you ought to run a lead yarn new.

Well, I asked for a futuristic novel!

Suggestions of my own? New work by Bradbury, Moore, Kuttner, Brackett, Hasse if you can get him, maybe DePina if you watch him . . . perhaps you could get something from Clark Ashton Smith .?? I wish you could.

Books . . . ?

More Taine, of course. "Gold Tooth", "Purple Sapphire", "Green Fire", "Quayle's Invention", and others. "The Court of the Dragon", from "King In Yellow", with Bok or Clyne pix. The Hodgson stories, of course, such as "Night Land" (a longie, I believe), "The House On The Borderland", and the rest. Perhaps Wright's "The World Below". Shiel's "The Purple Cloud", Stapledon's "Odd John", and this story, "Cosmos" . . . will somebody *please* tell me who wrote it??? I believe that it was written round-robbin style by several top Stfantasy authors.

Since Lloyd Alpaugh gave his vision of the F.F.M. of the future, I'll give mine . . it is published on the finest type of slick paper, and the edges are trimmed, of course (though I am not one of the trimmed edges fanatics)

It is in the large, wide edition, and has . . . well, Alpaugh's 240 pages are all right. Printing is of the finest quality.

The binding is not of ordinary stapling, but a better type, giving the magazine more durability . . possibly a stitching-glue affair, as in a book. The covers are of smooth, thin, glossy board, or stiff paper. The title is *Famous*

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FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES

Fantasy Classics, and it is still red or yellow, though the sunburst has given way to a square in the upper left-hand corner.

There is no advertising, except that for Popular Pubs itself.

The stories! They are all reprints of never-before-published-in-magazine-form books. Taine, Stapledon, Wright, Hodgson, Dunsany, Machen . . . ah, to use a trite phrase that is used often in "The Readers' Viewpoint", and applies perfectly to F.F.M. .

There is a regular department for weird poetry, and fantastic poetry, covering several pages.

The art department! *Now*, this is where I begin to wriggle with delight. The interiors are by the best in the field. . . Finlay, Paul, Lawrence, Bok, Clyne, Damon Knight, Margarian (there are two, Him and Her, and they are both excellent . though I'm afraid that She *is a bit better* . personal opinion and taste, though.) And what about this Lyn Ward?

Finlay does most of the covers. Occasionally Lawrence, Paul. A boy named Rozen is darn good in color work, if you can get him. Also McCauly, Malc Smith, . . Incidently, those last two are hot on interior Stf work.

And besides this super F.F.M., I also see an F.N.—*Fantasy Novels*—very much like it in format and all . . and publishing the magazine stories, from Munsey and other publishers . . the best from older issues of *Astonishing* and *Super Science*, for instance.

Now for the year's rating. Understand, I am not rating some stories as good and some as bad . . . *all* are good, excellent. But some, naturally, were better than others.

The year's covers were okay, though I am missing Finlay terribly. I repeat, Lawrence is almost V.F.'s equal in black-and-white, but never on cover work. The March cover, illustrating "The Man Who Was Thursday", was best. I liked the black background. Second was December's, for "The Lost Continent", third . well, I guess June's, for the Taine book, gets it, with September as fourth.

The stories . . well, there's no need for me to comment at all. I'll just list them in order of excellence.

"The Man Who Was Thursday", "The Greatest Adventure", "The Lost Continent", "The Postman of Otford", "The Wendigo", "The Day Of The Brown Horde", "The Highwayman", "The Novel Of The White Powder" "The Ghost Pirates".

And that's 1944.

Tom Pace

Eastoboga, Ala.

LAWRENCE AND CLYNE OKAY

The December F.F.M. has found its way into my clutches, and creates a highly favorable impression. The aforementioned impression is due mainly to that very fine Lord Dunsany short, "The Highwayman." Here is one of the slickest bits of fantasy I've seen in many a moon! The style of writing is utterly beautiful.

(Continued on page 118)

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(Continued from page 116)

Each phrase each sentence has a purpose, no matter how subtle. The prose flows smoothly along, with never a hitch. More of Dunsany would be welcome. And the same applies to Clyne. Clyne is equal to Lawrence. *That* is a *compliment!*

I notice several requests in the letter column for "The Willows", by Algernon Blackwood. "The Willows" would make, in my opinion, a good selection for F.F.M. The tale has a similar atmosphere to that of "The Wendigo", and is written with great care and skill. As a matter of choice, I prefer "The Wendigo", but "Willows" is also exceptionally neat fantasy.

How about a novel by Stapleton? "The Star-Maker", or perhaps, "Last and First Men."

"The Great God Pan" is not worth reprinting, since it appeared recently in a supernatural story anthology, Too, it lacks suspense and motivation. "The Novel of the White Powder" is its superior in every way.

Hooray! No cavemen or disosaurs this issue.

Would like to see another Lovecraft story in F.F.M. Lovecraft, in my opinion, was the greatest author produced by the pulps. Something by Clark Ashton Smith might be relished, as well.

The cover this time was no darn good. What is this, *Slushy Love Stories*, or what??? For shame, Mr. Lawrence. Please do better next issue. Liked the blue background, though.

What say to more poetry? F.F.M. has always been noted for its poems.

Paul Carter's letter showed a lot of solid thought. Methinks it will cause much controversy. I agree with most of his statements. The present editorial policy of F.F.M. is definitely an assurance of material of a higher literary standard. In fact, the average story used by the mag today is far more mature and better written than 90 percent of the pulp mags out. Credit is due you for this move. This is not intended as a slur on the Munsey classics. They had a certain indefinable atmosphere that newer stories do not possess.

Am looking forward to the day when Finlay returns.

Any chance of a portfolio composed of Lawrence drawings? Many of his full-page illustrations and others are certainly good enough to warrant combining them into a portfolio like the first and second sets of Finlay art. I can pick out two or three from this issue that I'd like to frame.

JOE KENNEDY

84 Baker Ave.,
Dover, N. J.

LIKES CAVE MAN YARNS

I have started reading F.F.M. just recently and only have three copies of the magazine but I have got loads of reading enjoyment out of those copies.

In my opinion Tooker's "Brown Horde" holds its place with the best fiction novels I have ever read and Taine's "Greatest Adventure" ranks but a step lower and is certainly

a startling new idea on the theory of evolution.

I have not yet finished Hyne's "Lost Continent" but from what I have read so far I am sure it is a first rater.

For my part I like the cave man stories best, and if you have any extra back copies, I would be very pleased to be informed of them, especially those issues of "Iron Star" and "Three Go Back."

Well, here's wishing you more power and more prehistoric stories in your magazine, and thanking you for the hours of reading pleasure I have received.

An F.F.M. fan,

TOM LEMMON

New Freeport, R. D. No. 1, Penn.

TOOKER'S STORY GREAT

A fellow I know, a darned nice guy and good friend in spite of the fact of his teaching English Lit. and being a bit snobbish on the question of what constitutes good reading, remarked recently, catching a glimpse of my September F.F.M.: "Why, that's a pulp magazine, isn't it?"

"A pulp with a near classical tone," I replied. "On its contents page have appeared the well-established names of Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood, Irvin Cobb, Norman Douglas, Arthur Machen, DeMaupassant, G. K. Chesterton and—yes—Shakespeare!"

Take it from me, the prof was impressed. Why shouldn't he have been?

Now for my admittedly late comment on the September issue. Tooker's novel goes right to the top of those you have presented under Popular's banner. It possessed unusual solidity—real bone and sinew. The anthropology was sharply in line with accepted conclusions, a rare thing for a novel of prehistoric times. The characters were etched in good focus, the action moved at a stirring pace. Altogether it was a fine interpretation of our dawn ancestors and their existence. I suggest that you commission Tooker to do another novel for you.

The author's letter was as interesting to me as his story, undoubtedly because his views on political economy in the main coincide with my own.

I possess nearly complete sets of the books of Burroughs, Machen, Blackwood, Dunsany, Stoker, Chambers, Haggard, Wakefield, Benson, Wells and many others, so for purely selfish reasons I would prefer for you to print none of these. Yet, realizing there are many who have not read their works, I can't bring myself to ask you not to print them.

PTAREK

LOST ON "LOST CONTINENT"

I was "lost" on "The Lost Continent" for every minute of its reading. Am only sorry that the remaining sheets of the manuscript are not decipherable—as I am sure there is much more that could be told concerning our hero and heroine, Deucalion and Nais.

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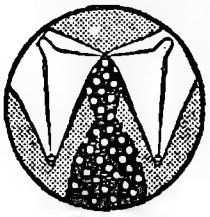

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FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES

I am not going to try to praise F.F.M., because I cannot command enough words to do so adequately. I shall only wish for it a long future—and here are a few suggestions I personally think will help to insure it.

First: More frequent publication, monthly as soon as conditions permit.

Second: Resumption of Munsey reprints, in conjunction with your present policy, either by alternating the two procedures, or publishing a sister magazine.

Third: Print our excellent publication on equally excellent paper, a "slick", no less. That would be somethin' to talk about, and believe me, I would talk.

Fourth: Merely continue *Fantastic's* excellent artistry. By all means retain Lawrence, Ronald Clyne, too—if his pix (*Railroad* influence) don't fall below their present standard. And you gotta get Finlay. And Paul, the inimitable Paul. No one has been able to take his place when it comes to science fiction portraiture.

I am purposely making this short, so that you may possibly find place for it in The Readers' Viewpoint—in the hope that some of *Fantastic's* readers may be able to supply me with copies of the June, August, November, and December 1942 issues of our magazine. I also have a few of the earlier issues of F.F.M., including the first one, which someone might need to complete their files.

I'll stop now. I'm sad, though. It's nearly three months I have to wait until "The Machine Stops."

MALCOLM F. BUSTIN

23 E. Commonwealth Rd.,
Cochituate, Mass.

A BIT OF CRITICISM

The December F.F.M. came into my greedy hands in the usual manner—although a trifle late out here on the plains—and was dealt with in the usual way. Following which, comes the usual letter.

"The Lost Continent" was a rather strange story. Into it went elements of both good and bad, and the result, instead of the customary so-so compound, was a definite mixture still containing parts of the great and parts of the—shall we say—not so great.

The basic idea seems good, and Atlantis is an ever-enchanting subject. And the ending, presumably because of a sequel, was nicely vague with interesting implications. A little implication goes a long way, to coin a phrase. The main objection I have to the story can be shown easily with the hero, Deucalion. It wasn't exactly that he was simple, or dense, or even trite—he was just plain corny. His gobs of morals and superiority complexes got more than a little tiresome as Atlantis drew nearer and nearer to her doom, and Cutcliffe Hyne drew closer and closer to the final page. The only human thing he did in the tale was to decide that Nais had some importance, may the All High Gods forgive him for his hideous infamy.

On the whole, though, it wasn't a bad story.

But it certainly was not up to par for *Famous Fantastic Mysteries.* Methinks a little more straight fantasy would go well; something of the Merritt type, or another one like Chesterton's "The Man Who Was Thursday."

Lawrence did nice work both on the cover and on the inside pix. I miss the black background on the cover, though—it was really more effective than this issue's watery blue. I wonder—did Lawrence intentionally give Phorenice cat's eyes in that cover painting?

Lord Dunsany's "The Highwayman" had considerably more to it than "The Postman of Otford" last issue. But I'm still far from being a Dunsany addict, possibly from purely personal reasons. However, this story did have something to it if you looked hard enough; his subtlety, it seems, wasn't as well concealed as in the Postman yarn.

Ronald Clyne came through nicely with his illustration. It's a really striking drawing.

"The Reader's Viewpoint" was brisk and interesting, and flavored with a distinct sincerity on the part of most of the writers. I miss the editor's page, which adds a personal touch to the magazine besides giving out with interesting information. Bring it back, by all means.

All of which about winds up another letter, to the regret of one, and doubtless much to the relief of everybody else.

CHAD OLIVER

% Mrs. C. L. Coleman,
Crystal City, Texas.

MORE DUNSANY, PLEASE

Lawrence has always seemed a bit—no—a considerable amount—better in the interior than on the frontpiece. Thus his silly offer on the September issue was none too good. His December cover was average, however, and perfectly passable. But the inside ils—those in black and white—ahaa! Now we come to something different. Lawrence, in a word, is magnificent. His full page, bordered drawings are unsurpassed in the entire field. They are—however—equaled—and the one who is capable of the equaling is Virgil Finlay. Lawrence, I repeat, to make sure my voice is heard, is truly magnificent.

Complaint dep't: We could use a few more pics—preferably framed full-pagers—per novel.

Feature yarns: Both were great. I rate Tooker's "Day of the Brown Horde" as being slightly better than Hyne's satirical "The Lost

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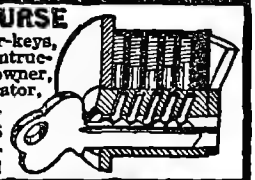

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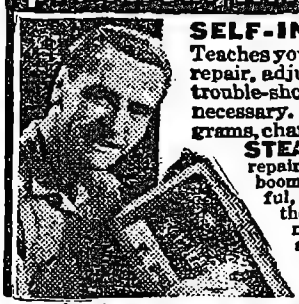

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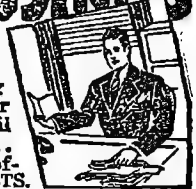

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Continent." Tooker's cave-man effort was about as good as "Three Go Back"—which means it is worth 4.3. Cutcliffe Hyne's work is worthy of an even 4.2—or classic rating.

A couple of sentences back I mentioned the Atlantis yarn as being a satire. Well, a lot of people may think I am slightly off my beam but. . . . It seemed as if Hyne was satirizing Deucalion and his beliefs. That is unusual—thoroughly unique. Poking fun, so to speak, at the teller of the tale by the very way in which he tells it. A unique bit of satire.

Dunsany's "The Postman of Otford" created no stir of the emotions, no overpowering sensation within me. In fact, I didn't like it. I was wondering why most everyone had raved so, and I was beginning to think that LD was a dud. And then I read "The Highwayman." It was magnificently written, cleverly told. It was a masterpiece. More, ed., more, more.

MILT LESSER

2302 Ave. O,
Brooklyn 10, N. Y.

FROM "SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE"

What really gets me is these people who are always wanting to change the title of F.F.M. I happen to be one of the guys who has been reading the mag ever since the Sept.-Oct. issue of 1939 and it certainly would seem funny with a new name. The enjoyment I have received during the last five years is well worth my dimes and quarters.

Another thing I don't like is that a lot of the boys who have read some of the great classics from other sources don't want them reprinted. That is very selfish. In civilian life I collected *Argosy* and many is the story that was an old friend, but I got enjoyment that a lot of people would be able to share in the harvest.

One of the things I can really agree on is that you have about the only true fantasy mag left. I don't care too much for S.F. So far I don't think you are doing the best you can, by excluding reprints.

In closing permit me to join the rest of the fans in urging you to publish your magazine oftener (and I mean monthly) and a lot of luck for the future.

SERGEANT BEN RUMSEY

PVT. HILL AND FINLAY MEET

I have been getting your magazine regularly, but since I came overseas I am finding it difficult to secure magazines. Consequently, I want to take out a year's subscription.

My address may change from time to time—however, mail is forwarded with the greatest possible expediency so that I have no worry about not getting any issues.

Thanking you sincerely,
PVT. DONALD F. HILL.

P. S.—I had the pleasure of meeting Virgil Finlay in person in a camp in the States, since he was in my company then.

NEW ZEALAND—MAY 3

I find myself quite unable to express in words the sorrow I felt when I learned of the death of A. Merritt; ever since reading the first novel of his that came to my notice—"The Conquest of the Moon Pool"—I have considered him to be the very greatest writer of fantastic fiction.

My personal favourite among his stories is "The Metal Monster;" this is surely the most nearly perfect depiction of an alien being ever to be put into words; in the whole history of fantasy there has never been anything to compare with it for sheer unusualness, utterly magnificent description, and absolute, overwhelming *power;* I give this novel precedence over any other scientific or weird fiction tale that I have ever read; next to it I place "The Ship of Ishtar" and "The Conquest of the Moon Pool" with "Dwellers in the Mirage" not far behind; "Creep, Shadow!" would probably be included had I read it all, but I have been able to locate parts 5 and 7 only; for best among his short tales I choose "Through the Dragon Glass" but they are all truly excellent.

For originality of conception and skill in handling he has seldom, if ever, been equalled; I think his imagination reached its highest peak in the creation of the Metal People and the Shining One; these are really incarnations of alien-ness, things so utterly strange as to make one marvel that the mind of a mere human being could conceive them.

Apart from his marvellous faculty of imaginative creation, Merritt was able to write a tale quite equal, and for the most part definitely superior to the very best of adventure stories, as far as characterization, action, and suspense are concerned, and his exquisite style maintains the same level of near-perfection throughout all his tales; taken either as adventure tales or fantasy, the "Merrittales" are "tops." Of course, the tales of Lovecraft and Smith are more truly literate on the whole, but I think Merritt surpasses even these two masters in the imaginate heights of his tales, and in the attainment of a really overwhelming and breathtaking climax he is almost unapproachable.

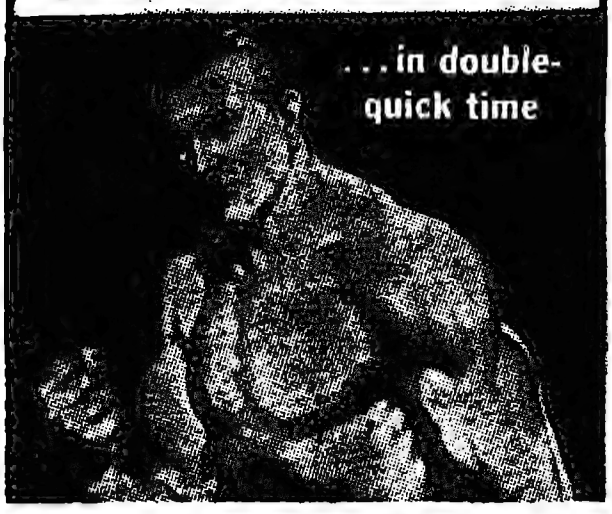
Of course, you *must* have his uncompleted novels finished or else print them as they are; if they are to be completed, let C. A. Smith take care of the fantastic side, and Seabury Quinn handle the characters and dialogue; I consider Smith to be the finest living author of fantasy, and Quinn at his best is *very* good; how about *new* stories from them both?

I received the June issue yesterday; so far I've read only "The Wendigo" and the departments.

"The Wendigo" is truly a classic; it has splendid atmosphere and captures perfectly the strangeness of the vast, fascinating, wooded spaces; I understand that the Wendigo fitted into the Lovecraft mythology as Ithaqua, the Wind-Walker; I hope that you will print "The Willows" as I have long sought this tale without success.

For the benefit of Anthony Riccardi and any others interested "The Drone Man" and

"I'll show YOU how to make yourself COMMANDO-TOUGH



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"Rhythm of the Spheres" were published in the August and October, 1936, issues, respectively, of *Thrilling Wonder Stories.*

NEW ZEALAND—MAY 17

I agree with Mr. Onderdonk that Merritt and Lovecraft were the master-writers of fantasy, but I disagree with him when he names "The Shadow Out of Time" as Lovecraft's finest work; it is, of course, a matter of opinion, but I personally consider "The Shadow Out of Time" one of Lovecraft's poorer productions; it is very well-written, certainly, and has splendid atmosphere, but the effect of this is almost completely deadened by the manifest ridiculousness of the story as a whole; that is *my* opinion. I have read comparatively few of Mr. Lovecraft's stories, but I have found most of these infinitely entertaining; I like them all so well that I cannot say which one is my favorite; Lovecraft ranks second only to Merritt with me.

Is there any possibility of "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath" being printed in F.F.M.? I am sure I am just one of many who would welcome this story! it would be great if you could print it with a dozen full-page Bok illustrations and a Bok cover.

An artist I should like to see on the cover is Margaret Brundage (hint).

Please print more of the weird type of tale and less of "science-fiction" and thinly varnished adventure; almost all of the fantasy that will survive as fine literature is of the "atmospheric" variety; the fan who prefers science-fiction is adequately catered for today, but little worthwhile weird fiction sees print; E. F. Benson is one author whose stories deserve reprinting; some of these are very rare and almost unknown.

I see no reason for *always* having one long story and one or more shorter tales in each issue; why not an issue full of short stories for a change; "The Willows," by Blackwood, "An Inhabitant of Carcossa," by Bierce, another Hodgson, another tale from "The King in Yellow," and one of Benson's fine stories, would go together to make an utterly delightful issue some time.

A final request: please give some fantastic verse a place in your pages; C. A. Smith writes magnificent weird poetry—I believe that much of his verse meets with the requirements of your present policy, having appeared in book form only; I'd love to read "The Hashishman," by Dunsany, which was praised highly by Lovecraft in his review of *Ebony and Crystal.*

THOMAS G. L. COCKCROFT.

7 ROSLYN RD.,
NAPIER, NEW ZEALAND.

F. F. M. HIS FAVORITE

I have complete files of F.F.M and F.N. to swap. Hope to see "The Willows" by Blackwood soon. You are doing a real service in publishing Hodgson, as his works are hard to get, even in England. Also, please get back to

monthly the very earliest second possible. This three months' gap seems interminable—a month used to be too long between issues of my favorite magazine. Lawrence is very good but Bok fits the "King in Yellow" stuff best.

JOHN E. HERZOG.

897 LAFAYETTE AVE.,
BUFFALO 9, N. Y.

LIKED "GHOST PIRATES"

I have been a reader of F.F.M. for just a short time, but now that I've discovered it, I intend to read it as long as it is published. The Dec. issue for '43 was my first, and I have enjoyed all the stories so far except "The Man Who Was Thursday." Parts of it were simply dead.

I greatly enjoyed "Three Go Back," "The Greatest Adventure," and most of all "The Day of the Brown Horde." I also liked "The Ghost Pirates" and in spite of what one of your readers said I still think it belonged in F.F.M. because if it wasn't out of the ordinary and surely it was strange, then I never saw a story that was. Also, I don't care what you call your magazine as long as you continue to publish it and keep up the excellent stories in it.

If any readers have copies of Haggard's "She" or the sequel "Ayesha" I am looking for them. I also want Burroughs' "Back to the Stone Age," "Pirates of Venus" and "Lost on Venus."

Yours for F.F.M. bigger and oftener.

MRS. PAUL SVOREC.

GRANBY, COLORADO.

THINKING OF FINLAY

Compliments and congratulations of high merit are herewith resounding from yours truly to Lawrence. In his field, I rate him second only to Paul and the immortal Finlay. In other words, it was a swell cover on the September ish. The interior for "Postman of Otford" also impressed me.

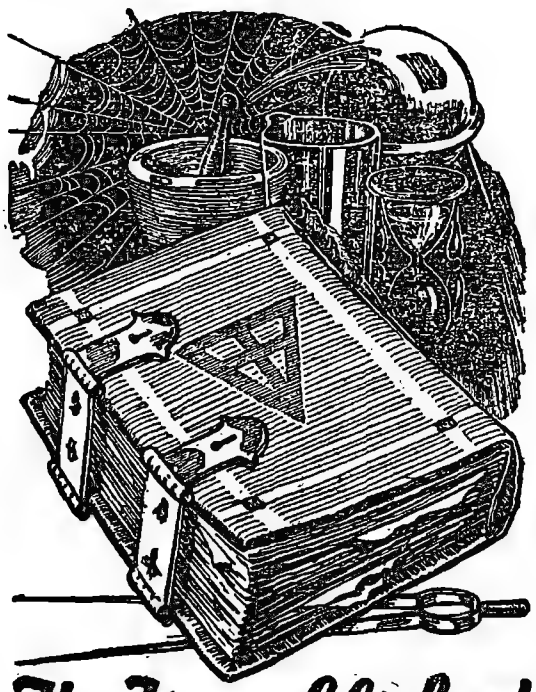
"The Day of the Brown Horde" was a pretty good yarn, but there is much room for improvement. While it was well written all the way through, I did not feel that it lay strictly inside the bounds of real fantasy. Machen's story was quite good, but what story of his isn't? "The Postman of Otford" was, to say the least, very intriguing, and certainly different. I don't usually care for short short stories, but if anyone said that he did not like this story, he would only be showing what a poor judge of literature he was.

In the readers' section, one letter in particular stood out, it was the one by A. H. L. It seemed different from the usual letter, if for no other reason that that he prefers Paul to Finlay. I must admit that Paul is a great illustrator and has done some great work in the field of Science-Fiction, but to me, Finlay is incomparable in Fantasy illustrations. I do agree with him that *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* should be published monthly. You would certainly have no trouble selling the mags.

BILL HESSON.

371 E. CLAREMONT ST.
PASADENA 6, CALIF.

SECRETS ENTRUSTED TO A FEW



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FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES

FINEST FANTASY MAG!

I have just received the Sept. 1944 F.F.M. and as per my usual custom, I read through the letters from the readers first, and have already begun reading "The Day of the Brown Horde" which promises to be very good. In this issue, I particularly enjoyed the letter of A. H. L. and I share many of his opinions.

I am a minister and now working on my Doctor's degree. (I already have my B. A., B. D., and Th. M. degrees). However, this does not keep me from reading FANTASY—and this type of reading proves a wholesome diversion from my regular reading and study. I have many hundreds of magazines in my collection but it was not until a few months ago that I saw my first copy of F.F.M. The *only* reason I didn't begin buying F.F.M. with the first issue was because of its title. I don't particularly care for "mysteries" and naturally supposed that a magazine labeled a "mystery" magazine would contain this type of stories. As soon as I realized what F.F.M. was I began researching back copies and now have all five *Fantastic Novels* and all but three F.F.M. The three I lack are Dec. 1939 and April and August 1940. If any readers have these issues in duplicate I would like to hear from them. Incidentally, I have picked up about a dozen duplicate F.F.M.s which I'll trade.

Looking back through the letters from the readers, I find some of unusual interest. Three individuals who had outstanding ideas in their letters were Cecil M. Hinote, Chas. W. Wolfe, and Stanley Haynes. I agree with these and hundreds of readers who want the *best* in Fantasy whether it be reprint or not. The *best* source for most of the best fantasy is of course, the old Munsey publications.

I am a collector of Edgar Rice Burroughs and have all fifty-five of his books in the *first edition*, including the two rare "Tarzan Twin" books. I even have book jackets for all these except two. I have the only five A. L. Burt reprints and a number of foreign editions in German, Spanish, Bohemian, Esperanto, British, etc. I would like to find more of these, and also ERB big-little books, book jackets, and Tarzan comics from newspapers.

I also have the majority of ERB in its original magazine form. I still lack a few older story parts from *All-Story, All Story-Cavalier, Argosy-All Story, New Story* and reprint stories from *Modern Mechanix and Invention.* I would be interested in hearing from fans who may have duplicate ERB magazine parts. I have saved a large number of duplicate parts which I would trade.

I believe I am one of the few collectors to have all four of the early and very rare ERB stories that never had book publication— "The Man-Eater" (Ben, King of Beasts) from N. Y. Evening World, "Beyond Thirty" from Feb. 1916 *All Around* Magazine. "The Girl From Farris's" from *All-Story Weekly* and "The Efficiency Expert" from *Argosy-All Story.*

To complete my files I need a number of copies of *Argosy, All-Story, Cavalier, Amazing*

Quarterly, Blue Book, New Magazine, "New Story" Magazine and *All Around Magazine.*

In closing, I want to thank the editors of the finest of all the fantasy magazines for their courtesy in printing this letter.

REV. DARREL C. RICHARDSON.

ORMSBY VILLAGE,
ANCHORAGE, KENTUCKY.

MORE BLACKWOOD, PLEASE

"The Greatest Adventure" is cast in the old familiar mold of the "it happened yesterday" stories. And yet Taine has made a creditable work of it, has made a few superficial alterations that give the story the same indefinably *unusual* feeling of his last work in F.F.M. The garish, but somehow believable—if one's imagination is elastic enough—view of an expedition cavorting happily amidst the fossilized bones of a long-dead South Polar civilization and its pleasant little offspring ("monstrous spawn" is the stock phrase, I believe) . . . is certainly fantastic enough for anyone. Too bad the plot insisted on meandering all over the place. Had it not, Taine's tale might have been up to the *Famous Fantastic* par, though that is a nicely high mark to try for.

"The Wendigo" managed it, however, even overshooting and surpassing the goal. I nod enthusiastically at HPL's comments thereupon; that yarn is heart-warmingly enjoyable in its mature and solid writing.

The supreme essence of its horror is packed in those ultimate, searing lines: "Oh, my feet of fire! My terrible, burning feet of fire!" A focal point of the whole tale, it is a quotation that will long be remembered—together with the "May you live forever, and I never die" one from "Ark of Fire."

Thus, more of Blackwood's works would certainly not be amiss. Machen is definitely a good idea, too; there's been much approbation over his stuff.

More Chambers and Hodgson, if possible. Am leery of some of Doyle's dated semi-fantasies, although some others, again, such as "The Lost World," are fair enough.

BILL STOY.

140-92 BURDEN CRESCENT,
JAMAICA 2, N. Y.

"WENDIGO" EXCELLENT

Add another name to your long list of regular readers! Yep, that Lawrence cover for the June issue completely sold me on F.F.M. And the stories and illustrations were right up to par with that cover. TW especially impressed me as a true example of Fantasy. (Need I say more as to its quality?)

Suggestions: even considering the present shortage of paper, could you possibly go bi-monthly? This thing of four issues a year is too much to bear.

I believe the changing of the name of the magazine to *Fantasy Classics* would greatly increase circulation, through its greater appeal to the adult mind.

As to the stories, how about those old favor-

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ites, "The Moon Pool," and "Ship of Ishtar," complete in one volume each? Also some of Burroughs' Mars stories would be welcome. Your artwork is fine as it is, but how about some of Bok on the cover, as Chad Oliver suggested?

I do not like your present policy, but as long as you maintain the high quality found in the June issue, F.F.M. will continue to be all right by me.

I am interested in any of the old classics in magazine or book form, so if you know of anyone having them, would you please let me know?

JACK PERRY.

1401 STEWART AVE. S.W.,
ATLANTA, GA.

COMPLIMENT FOR FOX

I wish to congratulate you on keeping up the standard of your magazine in spite of cutting out reprints. "The Greatest Adventure" was a fine story, although it seemed to me it was a little too "gory."

When I first saw "The Wendigo" on the contents page, I said, "Humph, probably some more filler like "The Ghost Pirates!" Boy, did I get a shock. It was one of the best pieces of fantasy I have run across. By all means get more of Blackwood.

Lawrence is a fine artist, though not another Finlay. His opener and cover for "The Greatest Adventure" were superb. By the way, who did the main picture for "The Wendigo?" It was the best one in the issue.

Fans, attention: I have a small copy of A. Merritt's immortal "Burn, Witch, Burn!" I will trade this for any back issues of F.F.M. containing any of Merritt's stories except "Moon Pool," "Creep, Shadow!"

To the editor: Is it possible to purchase back issues of F.F.M. from the publishers? I am particularly trying to get a copy of Merritt's "Dwellers in the Mirage."

I close now with one last prayer for monthly publication, reprints and Merritt's "Ship of Ishtar."

K. M. HARMAN.

627 CHAUNING AVE.,
ATLANTA, GA.

Editor's note: Fox did the picture of the Wendigo. We have no back issues of F.F.M. for sale.

CAN YOU HELP?

Enclosed please find money order for $3.00 which will renew my subscription to *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* for 12 issues.

I started to read this magazine about two years ago and find it so interesting that I can hardly wait for the next one. It is too bad that we have such a long wait between issues. I notice all your other readers want the magazine to become a monthly mag. And why not? A magazine as popular and entertaining as

F.F.M. should be monthly. Think of how happy we readers would be!

One thing bothers me. Ever since I began reading F.F.M. I see all kinds of references to Merritt's "Ship of Ishtar." I've asked friends—I've asked acquaintances—I've looked here and I've looked there, but no one seems to have the story. It has become an obsession with me. Merritt's stories are wonderful, and I've enjoyed every one I have read. They are stories you can read over and over and never tire of them. Can you tell me if there is any way at all that I can get to read "Ship of Ishtar"? If I could just borrow the story and read it once, it would make me very happy.

Thanking you for anything you can do, and hoping F.F.M. eventually goes on a monthly basis, I am

A satisfied reader,
EMILIE A. COLE.

3548 OPAL ST.
LOS ANGELES 23, CALIF.

TAINE AMAZING

The first story in the June F.F.M., "Greatest Adventure," was one of the best I've ever read. It seemed after I was into the pages that I was swimming in the author's fountain pen. I could see each character and his and her movements throughout the story. John Taine's picture description of the monsters, etc., was amazing. I couldn't leave the story for one minute. I finally finished it in the pressure chamber here at the air force school.

A pleased reader,
PVT. AUGUST S. RABER.

F. F. M.'S POLICY OKAY

I am one of your "silent fans" who usually reads and enjoys the stories but, due to lack of time, or inertia, does not write. I have just finished the June issue and have several comments:

First: The novel "The Greatest Adventure" is, in my opinion, the best of Bell's that I have read. He deserves to rank with Smith and Weinbaum, and I hope you will publish more of his.

Second: "The Wendigo," although a marvelous story, still can be found so easily and in so many different forms that it was not so greatly appreciated. After all, I think that you should try to publish those stories which are difficult to get, not those which anyone has access to.

I must confess that when the issue containing the "Ark of Fire" came out, I was boiling over. "The Ark" didn't impress me very greatly and the prospect of no more Munsey's and quarterly publication had me foaming at the mouth. On thinking it over, though, I find that all I miss are the completion of the trilogies (which I am still hoping you will break down and publish) and several serials from other outside magazines which it didn't seem likely were going to be published, anyhow. So I have calmed down a bit, at least enough to write a rational letter.

Might suggest for future republication Kline's

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"Venus" books (I don't think they've appeared in magazines). None of the Mars books of Burroughs, please; they are too easy to get. I think that the "King in Yellow" is about milked dry. "The Repairer of Reputations" is about the only worthwhile story left in it.

When I heard of Merritt's death I felt that I would like to cry. Anyone who has read "The Dwellers in the Mirage" or "The Ship of Ishtar" will realize what a blow this is to fandom and to fantasy. Of the great immortals of scientification and fantasy only E. E. Smith is left. Which reminds me that anyone who has any of Merritt's works except "Seven Footprints to Satan" in book (not pocket book) form, *please* get in touch with me.

LESTER R. FORD, JR.
5804 HARPER AVE.,
CHICAGO, ILL.

Editor's note: So many readers seem to have read "The Wendigo" for the first time in F.F.M., that we wonder whether it is not difficult to find in many cities.

A VISIT FROM SATURN

Careful inspection of the June F.F.M. leads me to say to you that it is an issue of which you should be proud. Publication of my letter in this issue resulted in several letters coming to me from fans—most pleasant, as last week I received a letter from a chap I hadn't seen in several years, now a sergeant in the U. S. Army, stationed on the Pacific Coast. So thank you for printing it: hearing from this old acquaintance alone made its appearance of value.

I regard your Readers' Dept. very highly. I read the letters of the various readers with great pleasure—then invariably read them all over again. Naturally, unanimity of opinion is not to be expected when ideas come from so many different sources; the differences of opinion help to make this section of F.F.M. fascinating. Critical examination shows F.F.M. has a very high type of reader. *Please* admit as many letters as space permits.

The other night I awoke suddenly to see two dim shapes seated on the foot of my bed. One was of form and appearance that no words of mine can describe, and the other plainly was a human ghost. Said he of the fantastic form, "What are you doing here?"—and the human wraith replied, "I've come back from Beyond to see the June issue of F.F.M.; I'll look at this fellow's while he's asleep." The weird pair then pored over the pages of my favorite magazine. Finally, he of the indescribable shape declared —"Well! that *is* a magazine; we've nothing like it on Saturn. Guess I'll steal this one, and take it back with me." Faced with so severe a loss, I leapt from the bed, and the uncanny pair vanished through the window in a gust of vapor!

That paragraph ought to be enough (and more!) to conclude this letter!

THYRIL L. LADD.
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